Cowboy stories

MARCH—20c

AN ILLUSTRATED WESTERN MAGAZINE

LEACH OF THE BAR-G-BAR

A RIPROARIN' COWBOY HITS THE HIGH SPOTS IN A BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL BY

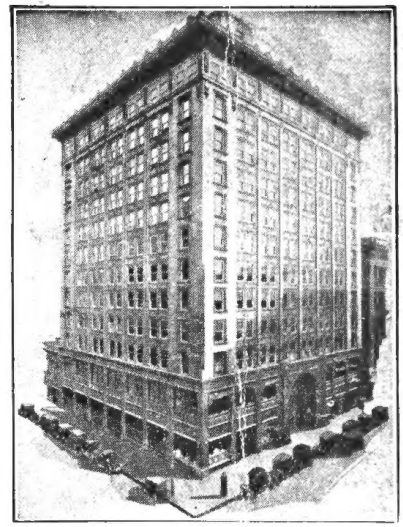
H. BEDFORD-JONES

A CLAYTON MAGAZINE

Multiplies His Earnings by the *Salary-Doubling Plan!*

A. W. Weber was working in a grocery store when he took up home-study business training. Eighteen months later, he had earned for himself the position of Assistant Auditor of the Ohio Savings Bank and Trust Company, Toledo, at a salary-increase of 150 per cent.

More recently, he has been made Assistant Secretary and Assistant Trust Officer of the bank in which he started as a clerk. His salary-increases now exceed 200%.



Ohio Savings Bank and Trust Co., Toledo —one of the largest and best banks in Ohio

—How Home-Study Training Nets A. W. Weber 125% a Month!

The prospect of working in a grocery store all his life did not satisfy A. W. Weber, a Toledo man. He resolved to make a ***new start***—and to speed his progress he undertook LaSalle training in Higher Accountancy. He secured a job first as time-keeper in an automobile plant—then as clerk in the Ohio Savings Bank and Trust Co. Within 18 months his training had helped him to the position of Assistant Auditor.

Since that time, repeated promotions have advanced him to the position of Assistant Secretary and Assistant Trust Officer, and he writes that ***his monthly dividends on his investment are at a rate in excess of 125%.*** Read his letter, and the letter of his employer, in the column at the left.

Mr. Weber is now adding to his momentum by means of a second LaSalle course—home-study training in Law.

Will You be Selected for Promotion?

You have often wondered whether or not it would pay you to take up specialized business training with LaSalle.

But—can there be any *question* about its paying when so many thousands of LaSalle members are advancing—thru its aid—to positions of responsibility and influence?

In the very bank of which Mr. Weber is an officer, thirty-eight other men and women have enrolled with LaSalle; in the Guaranty Trust Company, New York, LaSalle members number ninety-eight; in the Royal Bank of Canada, two hundred and seventy-nine.

During only six months' time, as many as 1,248 LaSalle members reported definite salary-increases totalling $1,399,507, *on average increase per man of 89 per cent.*

Send for Free Outline of LaSalle Salary-Doubling Plan

What would it be worth to *you* to increase your earnings 89 per cent—within a comparatively few months?

The LaSalle *salary-doubling plan* will show you how to do so. Simply fill out and mail the coupon—and a 64-page book describing this salary-doubling plan will be sent you FREE. Whether you adopt the plan or not, the basic information it will place in your hands is of very real and definite value.

Balance the two minutes that it takes to fill out the coupon against the rewards of a successful career—then clip and mail the coupon—*now.*

LaSalle Made Possible the Opportunity

"My attention has been directed to our Mr. Weber, who is now in his second course of study with your institution. This is most interesting to us, as Mr. Weber's progress has been quite exceptional, he having advanced from a clerkship to Assistant Secretary and Assistant Trust Officer in our bank in the short period of five years.

"This attainment is most gratifying to us, and we are frank in giving expression to our belief that much credit is due to your splendid institution, through which medium opportunity was afforded in making it possible for him to accomplish the purpose.

"It has ever been our policy to be helpful and to encourage those of our employees in acquiring information and knowledge looking to their own betterment, and we are most anxious and willing to recognize and cooperate with those employees whose desires and ambitions are directed to greater achievements and further advancements." (Signed)

EDWARD KIRSCHNER,
Vice-Pres. Ohio Savings Bank and Trust Company.

LaSalle Training Changes Opportunities Into Dividends

"Without the knowledge obtained from your course, I would not be able to fill the position I hold today. Monthly dividends are being paid me on my investment in LaSalle training, in the form of increased salary, at a rate in excess of 125 per cent." (Signed)

ARTHUR W. WEBER,
Ass't Sec'y Ohio Savings Bank and Trust Company.

LASALLE EXTENSION UNIVERSITY

The World's Largest Business Training Institution

CLIP AND MAIL

LASALLE EXTENSION UNIVERSITY Dept. 375-R Chicago

I shall be glad to have details of your salary-doubling plan, together with complete information regarding the opportunities in the business field I have checked below. Also a copy of "Ten Years' Promotion in One," all without obligation.

- ☐ **Business Management:** Training for Official, Managerial, Sales and Departmental Executive positions.
- ☐ **Modern Salesmanship:** Training for position as Sales Executive, Salesman, Sales Coach or Trainer, Sales Promotion Manager, Manufacturer's Agent, Solicitor, and all positions in retail, wholesale, or specialty selling.
- ☐ **Higher Accountancy:** Training for position as Auditor, Comptroller, Certified Public Accountant, Cost Accountant, etc.
- ☐ **Expert Bookkeeping:** Training for position as Head Bookkeeper.
- ☐ **C.P.A. Coaching for Advanced Accountants.**
- ☐ **Law: Training for Bar; LL.B. Degree.**
- ☐ **Commercial Law:** Reading, Reference and Consultation Service for Business Men.
- ☐ **Traffic Management—Foreign and Domestic:** Training for position as Railroad or Industrial Traffic Manager, Rate Expert, Freight Solicitor, etc.
- ☐ **Railway Station Management:** Training for position of Station Accountant, Cashier and Agent, Division Agent, etc.
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- ☐ **Modern Foremanship and Production Methods:** Training for positions in Shop Management, such as that of Superintendent, General Foreman, Foreman, Sub-Foreman, etc.
- ☐ **Personnel and Employment Management:** Training in the position of Personnel Manager, Industrial Relations Manager, Employment Manager, and positions relating to Employee Service.
- ☐ **Modern Business Correspondence and Practice:** Training for position as Sales or Collection Correspondent, Sales Promotion Manager, Mail Sales Manager, Secretary, etc.
- ☐ **Business English:** Training for Business Correspondents and Copy Writers.
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- ☐ **Effective Speaking:** Training in the art of forceful, effective speech, for Ministers, Salesmen, Fraternal Leaders, Politicians, Clubmen, etc.

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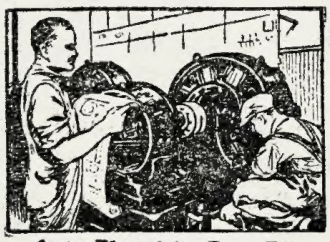
Earn $3,500 to $10,000 a Year in Electricity

Get Into Electrical Contracting

John Jirinec, 1133 Fourth Ave., Astoria, L.I., New York, makes $600 to $1000 a month in business for himself. He says Cooke Training is responsible for his success.

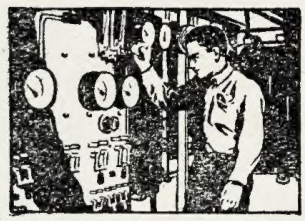
Radio Offers You Hundreds of Opportunities

$20 to $25 a day in Radio—That's what Jos. Cunningham, Athens, Ohio, is making out of his Cooke Training today.



Auto Electricity Pays Big

W. E. Pence, Albany, Oregon, specializes in Auto Electricity and makes $750.00 a month. Was formerly a mechanic earning $30.00 a week.

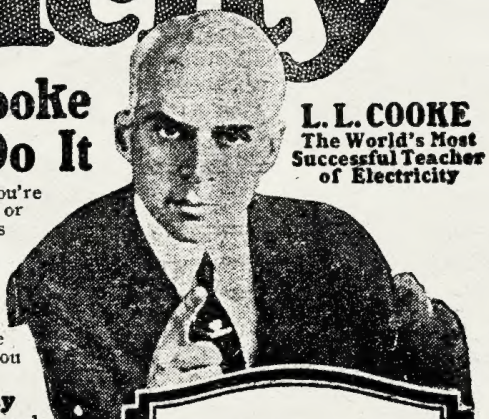


Big Money in Electrical Construction

A. F. Klemz, 4449 Kerwin, Detroit, Michigan, earns over $5000 a year in Electrical Construction work. He formerly earned $5 a day.

Thousands of Cooke Trained Men Do It

You want to make big money. You're not satisfied with your $20 or $30 or $40-a-week job. Then Electricity is the field for you—the field of *Big Pay* and big opportunities. As a trained Electrical Expert—a "Cooke" Trained Man—you can easily earn $70 to $200 a week just like the men in the pictures to the left and not work half as hard as you do now.



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I will show you how to make extra money doing Electrical jobs in your spare time. I'll show you how to do them, where and how to get the jobs and give you five outfits of tools and apparatus to work with. This spare time work will bring you in several times the monthly payments on my Course. Even though you haven't the ready cash, you can afford my training. It's not an expense—*IT PAYS ITS OWN WAY.*

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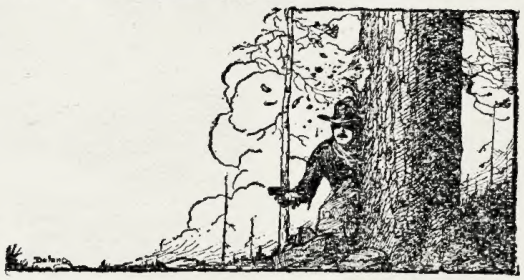
Cowboy Stories

W. M. CLAYTON, *Publisher*
HAROLD HERSEY, *Editor*



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That the stories therein are clean, interesting, vivid; by leading writers of the day and purchased under conditions approved by the Authors' League of America, Inc.;
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VOL. II MARCH NUMBER No. 2

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In the Next Issue

IF you want to know what happens when "thuh hoss that can't be rode" meets "a man what can't be throwed," be sure and read GEORGE J. BRENN'S story, "THE MAN THAT COULDN'T BE THROWED."

Clem Waters and his punchers are determined that the woollies were not going to overrun the range controlled by them, but in "WATERS VERSUS WOOLIES," by HARRY A. BURTON, they come pretty close to being driven off themselves before the battle ends.

Bill Deckard and Jim Powers are roped and hogtied by the smile of the same girl in F. L. COOPER'S cowboy yarn, "WHITE CHAPS AND HEAP TROUBLE." However, the race is not always won by the swiftest runner for the simple reason that unexpected accidents are liable to occur.

J. IRVING CRUMP, who writes only for "Cowboy Stories," "Ace-High Magazine" and "Ranch Romances," contributes a whirlwind booklength cowboy novel to the next issue of this magazine, entitled, "THE BRAND BLOTTERS OF LODI LEDGE."

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How Strong Are You?

CAN YOU DO THESE THINGS?

Lift 200 lbs. or more overhead with one arm; bend and break a horseshoe; tear two decks of playing cards; bend spikes; chin yourself with one hand.

Can you do any of them? I can and many of my pupils can. It is remarkable the things a man really can do if he will make up his mind to be strong. It is natural for the human body to be strong. It is unnatural to be weak. One leading writer on physical culture says: "It is criminal to be weak." I have taken men who were ridiculed because of their frail make-up and developed them into the strongest men of their locality.

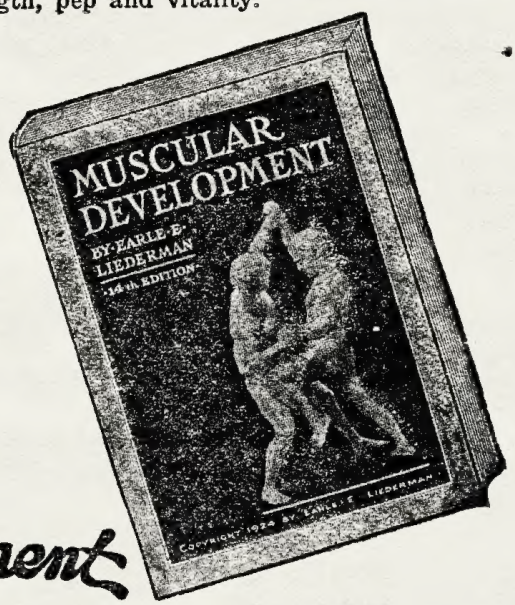
I Want You For 90 Days

These are the days that call for speed. It once took four weeks to cross the ocean—now it takes less than one. In olden days it took years to develop a strong, healthy body. I can completely transform you in 90 days. Yes, make a complete change in your entire physical make-up. In 30 days I guarantee to increase your biceps one full inch. I also guarantee to increase your chest two full inches. But I don't quit there. I don't stop till you're a finished athlete—a real strong man. I will broaden your shoulders, deepen your chest, strengthen your neck. I will give you the arms and legs of a Hercules. I will put an armor plate of muscle over your entire body. But with it comes the strong, powerful lungs which enrich the blood, putting new life into your entire being. You will have the spring to your step and the flash to your eyes. You will be bubbling over with strength, pep and vitality.

A Doctor Who Takes His Own Medicine

Many say that any form of exercise is good, but this is not true. I have seen men working in the mills who literally killed themselves with exercise. They ruined their heart or other vital organs, ruptured themselves or killed off what little vitality they possessed.

I was a frail weakling myself in search of health and strength. I spent years in study and research, analyzing my own defects to find what I needed. After many tests and experiments, I discovered the secret of progressive exercising. I have increased my own arm over 6½ inches, my neck 3 inches and other parts of my body in proportion. I decided to become a public benefactor and impart this knowledge to others. Physicians and the highest authorities on physical culture have tested my system and pronounced it to be the surest means of acquiring perfect manhood. Do you crave a strong, well proportioned body and the abundance of health which goes with it? Are you true to yourself? If so spend a pleasant half hour in learning how to attain it. The knowledge is yours for the asking.



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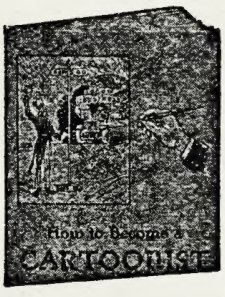

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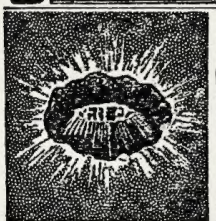

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COMMENCE $1900 YEAR

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INCOME TAX AUDITORS — **CLERKS AT WASHINGTON, D. C.**
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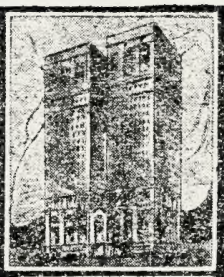

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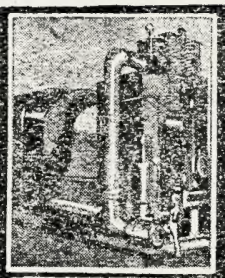

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Leach of the Bar G Bar

LEACH OF THE BAR G BAR

By H. Bedford-Jones

Joe Leach waltzed into Sunrise County and took charge of the Bar G Bar in the interest of its legal owner. But Aunt Hennie Billings, the sharp-tongued old maid who also claimed the ranch and was its actual possessor, thought the "young feller" was working for her. Joe felt right mean about the way he was fooling Aunt Hennie, but felt plumb ornery in that set-to with the gang which was rustling Bar G Bar stock. And because he had aimed only to see justice carried out, things squared up even all around in a way that came as a complete surprise to him.

I

SOME two miles outside Las Vegas, a young man lolled in the saddle and rolled a smoke, and whistled thoughtfully as he eyed the Sangre de Cristo peaks off to the west. His saddle was highly uncomfortable, having been rented with the horse at a Las Vegas stable early that morning. The stretch of level road where he waited was a lonely one.

Purring out of town was the big automobile of Tom Crocker, whose Lazy C brand was known all over New Mexico. Tom Crocker himself was known even farther. He was a small, spry, spare man approaching fifty, gray under his Stetson, with a wrinkled and sun-tanned face studded with twinkling gray eyes. Beside him sat another cattle magnate, Moran. A rousing poker session had just broken up in town.

"Then you'll not do anything with that Indian Valley place?" asked Moran, as Crocker made himself comfortable for the forty-mile drive home.

"Nope," said Crocker. "I'm getting old, Bill, and sort of hanker after peace. I can afford to let that there outfit alone, I reckon:

Williams was the wrong man anyhow. I got enough worldly goods without going up against a passel of wildcats in the hills to grab more. The thing belongs to me now, but I'll let her lay."

"Ain't like you," commented Bill Moran.

"Neither is the rheumatism," and Crocker grimaced. "I got to go up to the Springs and boil out. Besides, I'm sort of taking care of myself in my old age, with that girl of mine to look out for. She sure was hell-set on not going East to school last week. I had a regular fight on my hands."

"How-come? She liked it all right last year."

"Yep, but she had a notion of running an outfit of her own. Naturally, I wouldn't hear to that." Crocker chuckled. "I packed up her duds unbeknownst to her, took her for a drive, landed her at the depot, and chucked her aboard the eastbound limited with a thousand cash in her handbag—just like that. She like to threw a fit over it, but she went."

Moran grinned, and shifted the cigar in his mouth.

"If I know her," he said, "she's liable to drop off that train and come back, or worse. She's got all your stubborn fighting foolishness, Tom. I'd hate to stack up against that girl when her dander's up!"

"Huh! So would I," admitted the fond parent. "That's why I got her off that-a-way. She's got her head full of old-timers' yarns about fighting and so forth. She heard about the lawsuit and me getting Indian Valley adjudged to me, and she was plumb set on going there and fighting it out. Doggone it, she's got spirit! But I aim to have peace."

"Get her married off."

"Huh! She'll do her own picking, don't worry—hell's bells! What's this?"

The brakes screamed. "This" proved to be a young man sitting his horse in the center of the road, horse and man apparently sound asleep. Crocker shouted angrily, and brought his car to a halt. The indolent rider woke up, straightened himself, and brought into view a large pistol covering the two in the car.

"Put 'em up and climb out," he ordered, and grinned. "Don't try to run over me—the trigger's quicker'n the engine. If you want to prove it, go ahead."

Both men took the holdup in silence, knowing they had too much cash about their persons to resist and trying to think of some circumventing m e t h o d. Crocker sniffed in disgust and got out of the car, while Moran followed suit on the other side.

"Circle front and join," ordered the bandit cheerfully.

They did so, keeping their arms well up. The holdup man dismounted, with befitting caution, and threw his horse's reins over its head. He was a long-jawed young man, with a most infectious smile and twinkle in his eyes; those eyes were dark blue, and were wrinkled at the corners, while his shoved-back hat showed crisp light hair, bleached by sun and wind. Not a desperate character by any means—and not one to take any chances with.

"I'm not right used to these automatic pistols," he observed, "but the safety catch is off and I reckon she'll shoot easy enough. Now let's see what you got."

He shoved the pistol against the body of Crocker, and removed from the latter's coat pocket an old-fashioned forty-five revolver. Then he turned his attention to Bill Moran, who proved unarmed.

"I reckon you gents might sit down on that bumper without bending it," he said, and examined Crocker's weapon. Then he held out his own to the astonished cattleman. "Here you are, for a souvenir."

Crocker took the weapon from the grinning bandit, and examined it.

"Durn your eyes!" he said. "Unloaded!"

"Sure," said the other. "Yours is loaded, though."

And he carelessly drew back the hammer of the revolver. Moran chuckled.

"That's a good one on you, Tom Crocker! A good one. How much will you take to let us go, feller?"

"I ain't a feller," said the bandit in his cheerful fashion. "My name's Joe Leach."

"And you're a hell of a bandit," said Crocker promptly. "Holding up two gents without even a mask, and then telling your name! Huh! How much you want?"

"Ten minutes," said Leach. The two men sitting on the bumper stared at him.

"Ten—what?" exclaimed Moran, puzzled.

"Minutes." Leach assumed an air of patience. "I see I got to speak in words of one syllable. Well, I was trying yesterday to see a hombre named Tom Crocker, and he was too durned busy with a poker session. I wanted to see him last night—nothing doing. I done heard that when the session was over he'd blow out home in his car, and then maybe would be a hundred miles away when I got there. So I aimed to see him here and now, and I done it."

Moran opened his mouth and gaped. Crocker's eyes bit out like steel.

"Mean to say this holdup was a joke?"

"Not by a durned sight," said Leach earnestly. "It ain't a joke, believe me! I aimed to get your personal attention, and I need it bad."

"Well, you sure got it," said Crocker, his lips twitching. "What you want of me?"

"A job."

Crocker swallowed hard. Moran broke into a rumbling chuckle that became a full-bellied laugh.

"Hurray!" he chortled. "This is pretty rich. Held up for a job! I'll give you a job, Leach—you bet! I can use you."

"I'm talkin' to Tom Crocker right now, thanks," said Leach, and put up the gun in his hand to roll a smoke. "I'm sort of interested in working for you, Crocker."

"Howcome?" snapped the cattle magnate.

"I've heard you ain't got no use for any but a top-hand—I'm that. I've heard you can dispose of big jobs, more than just herding or even running a ranch. That's the kind I want. I've heard you're hard as nails, back up a man to the limit if he makes good, kick him out if he doesn't, and are just. You suit me right down to the ground, Crocker. How about it?"

Tom Crocker laughed, and it was hard to say whether this laugh held more anger or amusement.

"Want to run a ranch for me, do you?"

"No," said Leach. "I want a man's job, if you've got one."

"Huh!" Crocker surveyed him up and down, and reached for a plug of tobacco. He bit at it jerkily. "Huh! Think you can run a blazer on me like this, do you—think I'll fall for it? You don't know me, feller. What do you know about my business?"

"Everything except local conditions," said Leach promptly. "And——"

"Know how to use a gun?"

"No. I can't hit a barn at fifty feet."

Moran chuckled at this. Crocker grunted again.

"Know everything about my business, do you? Prove up, hombre! You don't look like any cattleman to me. Where you from?"

"Born in the short-grass country. My folks moved to Montana. I been all kinds of things on a ranch. Been back East for a year tackling business, and failed at it. I'm broke."

"Huh! When you're broke, you ain't particular how you land a job."

"Naturally not," admitted Leach. "But I'm particular about what job I land."

Crocker turned and looked at Moran. "Ain't he a bird, Bill—ain't he, now? Me, I think he's plumb crazy."

"Me too," said Moran. The cheerful Mr. Leach grinned amiably.

"I'm tempted to agree with you gents at times. Do I drift back to town without a job or with one?"

"I'll give you a job, if you'll take it," said Crocker, with grim intonation.

"I'll take it," said Leach.

"You'll wish to thunder you hadn't!" growled Bill Moran, grinning to himself.

"Huh! I reckon you will," added Crocker.

"Probably so," said Leach. "Name the card."

"Ever hear of Indian Valley? No? Well, it's quite a ways from here in the wrong direction and you can get there quicker with an automobile than on a train," said Crocker. "Got any money?"

"Nine dollars and thirty cents."

Crocker reached into his pocket and produced a roll of bills, stripping off ten.

"Here's a hundred. I got an old flivver laying in the Stone Garage, in town, and you go get it—you can have it. Go to Indian Valley, over in Sunrise County. At Sunrise City, you'll find an agent of mine, if he ain't dead or lynched or run out. He's quit on the job. His name is Williams, Ernie Williams. He'll tell you what the

job is, and durned glad to do it so's he can quit. Want it?"

"It's my job," said Leach. "What's in it if I win?"

"Five thousand bonus and five thousand a year running things there for me."

"You're on." Leach held out the revolver. "You might want this if you meet a real holdup, and I might want my pistol—that's right. Thanks. An empty gun is a whole lot more good to me than a full one. Keeps me out of jail."

"Huh!" said Crocker, standing up. "If I was you, I wouldn't go around using my name. It ain't healthy over in that section."

"Oh!" said Leach thoughtfully. "So that's it, huh? Suits me fine. Much obliged. I'll report when the job's finished."

"If it ain't finished, don't report," said Crocker, climbing into the car. "So long!"

The big car went rolling away. Leach stared after it thoughtfully, then a grin came into his face.

"Huh!" he exclaimed in mimicry of his employer's grunt. "Huh! If you knew that Sally Crocker had put me up to this way of introducing myself, and that she and I aimed to get married, you'd of said 'So long!' in a different tone of voice, I reckon. If I hadn't met her back East last year, I'd still be there. Well—get along, you mangy cayuse!"

And Mr. Leach rode back to town, whistling cheerfully.

II

SOME days thereafter, Joe Leach came thumping into Sunrise City in a wheezy, battered old bunch of junk that had once been a good car. It was still a car—that was all.

He knew nothing more of his job than when he had taken it, but he had learned a little about Indian Valley. It was a small, rich valley up in the hills, off from everywhere, settled two generations back by a wagon-train of Missourians, and their descendants were known as hard customers, with accent on the hard.

Until the past few years they had run Indian Valley to suit themselves, keeping all strangers out, inter-marrying and in general ruling everything from courts to jobs. After the war all barriers were down and outsiders got in, but not all of them stayed. It was a tough country on foreigners, as those from the outside world were locally termed.

Leach faced the prospect cheerfully. He rolled over a steep divide, came down a twelve-mile, winding, twisting grade, and pounded along the valley floor on three cylinders for several miles, until he came into the one and only town of Sunrise City. All around loomed mountain peaks, while the main valley and its branches were a rich and fertile green, watered by a perpetual seepage. Beside the town was a good-sized stream of water. The farms were prosperous, the outlying ranches thick with fat cattle; most of the ranching part of the valley lay in the upper end beyond town, and in the branch valleys.

Rattling over a bridge, Leach drew up before a garage. Automobiles were few here, as the old-fashioned pump testified. Leach opened up his tank and watched as the gas was pumped in one gallon at a time, called the halt, and screwed down the cap. Then he smiled at the dour-faced proprietor as he reached for his money.

"Great place, this! Know a gent here by the name of Williams? Ernie Williams?"

"Heard of him," said the other, with an appraising, unfriendly look. "Friend, huh?"

"Friend?" said Leach, and his smile vanished. "Listen here! That hombre done me out of fifty dollars, see? I've run him down to here. I aim to collect, or bust his face. If you know him, where is he?"

The garage man grinned and loosened up, as he made change.

"Reckon you'll find him up to the hotel, stranger. He's been fixing to leave town, but I ain't seen him go out this morning. Done you out of money, huh?"

"He sure did—him and the man he works for," said Mr. Leach. "If there's two low-down coyotes on the face of the earth, it's them!"

"Well, I dunno you're far wrong there," said the other. "Hotel's along up the street on the right. Reckon you won't find Williams there till noon, though."

"If he's there then, that's all I ask," said Leach. "Much obliged, partner!"

He drove off up the street as directed. Sunrise City was a rambling place, sprawling beside the river and over two low hills, with no crowding. The one business street was several blocks long. Hitch-racks lined the walk, and the dust was considerably allayed by gentlemen whose chief occupations lay in sunning themselves and masticating tobacco. The courthouse was a large building of brick and adobe, and its wide square was shaded by stately trees. Beyond it lay the hotel.

As he slowly drove along, Leach was aware of eyes following him; he was being critically appraised. The garage man, he knew, would lose no time in spreading abroad that this "foreigner" was looking for Williams—all well and good.

Before the shabby frame hotel, Leach halted his flivver, alighted, and stretched himself. No one was in sight on the hotel verandah, the chairs were unoccupied. He strode in, and found a one-eyed gentleman behind a counter.

"Howdy," he greeted genially. "I'm looking for a feller by the name of Williams, and I heard he's stopping here. Where can I find him?"

The one eye appraised him critically. "Take a chair on the porch and he'll be along for dinner, I reckon. From down below?"

"Uh-huh. And going higher up. Reckon I'll eat dinner instead of Williams—he won't eat much when I get done with him."

"Oh!" said One-Eye, with interest. "Friend of his?"

"So friendly I'll put him in the hospital if he don't give up what he stole off me!" said Leach.

With this to amuse the gentleman, Leach went back to the porch. He picked out an unbroken chair, adjusted it to suit himself, leaned back comfortably, reposed his feet on the rail, and settled down to wait, with the help of a cigaret.

"I'll bet this town will sure be hanging on what happens here when Williams gets back!" he reflected, and chuckled softly. "Well, I reckon they'll get a show for their money—holy poker! Holy horntoads! Is it real?"

Suddenly Mr. Leach took his heels from the rail, lowered his chair, shoved back his hat, and stared—hard. Coming across the street toward the hotel, with packages in both hands, was a girl; more correctly, was Sally Crocker. He had thought her several thou-

"Joe! You—then you made it!"

sand miles away, and for a moment was stunned by sight of her. She wore khaki and leggings, and beneath her Stetson was a smiling, merry face whose dark blue eyes held all the energy of her father.

She mounted the steps to the verandah before seeing the staring Joe Leach. Then, catching sight of him, she halted and the packages escaped from her arms to fall unheeded.

"Joe! You—then you made it!"

Leach rose, swept the packages into a pile with one one foot, and reached for her hand.

"Are you real?" he demanded, with such blinking incredibility that she burst into a laugh. "My gosh, Sally! And I was just figuring on writing you a letter—"

Next instant she was in his arms—only to escape with a swift wrench.

"Stop it, Joe! Don't you dare breathe my name—come and sit down. If you want to play post office, take a better time and place—"

Leach accompanied her to the chairs and dropped into one. He was all at sea, and looked it. Salley Crocker surveyed him with twinkling eyes.

"What's the matter? You seem struck by lightning."

"I am," said Leach. "What on earth you doing here? Howcome you don't love me any more?"

"I do, silly," exclaimed the girl. "But I don't want all Sunrise City to know it, do I? I'm supposed to be a lunger, here for my health, and I'm going out in the hills on that pretext—"

"You look it," said Leach gloomily, regarding her vigorous face and wide-shouldered figure. "Yes, you look like a lunger. Going—where? Alone?"

"Yes. My name's Sally Jones right now, and I'm from Kansas City."

"Does your dad know it?"

"Not much." Her eyes darkened. "Daddy put up a game on me—got me aboard the eastbound limited before I knew it, bound for school. So I hopped off the first stop and came here."

"Gosh!" said Leach in consternation. The girl laughed.

"Williams said the same thing, just the same way." A troubled look came to Leach's face.

"He'll tell your dad you're here, then there'll be hades to pay!"

"He won't tell," asserted the girl confidently. "Ernie Williams knows better."

"Hm!" said Leach, with an inquiring glance. "Got something on him?"

She nodded brightly. "Several things. By the way, did Dad tell you what the job here was—did he go into details?"

"Nope." Leach shook his head. "Said Williams would inform me. What are you grinning about? Is it so tough as all that?"

"Worse." Her amused look vanished, and her blue eyes rested on him seriously. "It's a bad mess, Joe. I didn't know it was so bad when we framed things up. I've learned more since then. I'm mighty sorry now that you've taken it on, but maybe we can pull it off together."

"Well, just what is it?"

She rose. "Williams can tell you that, but don't be seen talking with him. If these natives suspect you're on Dad's business, they'll act up. They're bad, too!"

Leach grunted. "Where you going?"

"To work. In a couple of hours. I'm off. We'll meet soon enough—mustn't be seen talking any more together. So long!"

"So long, then—and next time we meet, you'd better be more friendly!"

"Wait and see," she flung back laughingly and was gone.

Leach resumed his easy posture, and collected himself. He was amazed, to put it mildly, by this meeting; yet he might have expected something of the sort. Sally Crocker never did what she was supposed to do, was always loaded with dynamite, and life in her company was never dull. However, this business was a bit too strong.

In it was more than dynamite—the situation was full of T N T and then some, thought Leach uneasily. When Crocker found his daughter was parading around these hills in khaki, he would raise Cain; and if anybody else discovered it first, trouble would ensue. For some reason the old cattleman was not loved in these parts.

Tiring of his unrewarded vigil, Leach ambled inside and engaged the one-eyed proprietor in conversation. The native was

curious, very curious, and Leach satisfied his curiosity in a wide-eyed and innocent fashion, with a string of alleged facts which would have made Sally Crocker stare her hardest. Most people believed Joe Leach—he had an engaging, ingenuous air which marked him as a simple-hearted young man with no intent to deceive. He was not so harmless as he looked, however, having rubbed up against the world long enough to get the corners smoothed off.

His account of himself, therefore, was circumstantial and plausible, well calculated to banish any local suspicion. The proprietor warmed to his guest and took him to a room. Finding that this young puncher had come up from Utah, from a valley removed from the world and much like Indian Valley itself, and was seeking a homestead place, he volunteered a word or two of advice.

"Don't you be in no hurry to find you a place, Leach. They's lots of good land here, but you'd better get acquainted first and take up a quarter-section later on."

Leach nodded, fully comprehending the warning to let himself be sized up by the natives.

"Is any gun-toting barred here?" he asked. "I've chased this here Williams a long ways, and if he pulls on me I don't aim to let him shoot first."

"Go as far as you like," said the one-eyed gentleman, cordially. "There won't be no mourning if you shoot this here coyote, or the man he's working for, either! So long."

Leach grinned to himself. Cheerful prospects for anyone employed by Tom Crocker!

A little later, washed and fresh-shaved, with Sally in mind, Joe Leach stood near the cigar counter in the dingy lobby and smoked thoughtfully. He was not blind to the remarkable assemblage of gentlemen who now thronged in and about the hotel; one would have imagined a loafer's convention in progress, and the spittoons were liberally patronized. Most of Sunrise City seemed to be hanging around and waiting for something to happen.

There was a stir outside. A car drove up and halted. From the car alighted a rangy man with a harsh hatchet-face—Leach knew this was Williams from the comments of those around. Williams looked at the crowd, narrow-eyed, as though expecting trouble, then made his way up the steps and to the desk.

"Got any mail for me?" he snapped to the proprietor.

"No," snapped the latter with equal acerbity.

Leach quietly drew his unloaded pistol and touched Williams on the arm. Williams whirled, to look into the weapon.

"Put 'em up," said Leach, loudly. "Up, durn you! I got you now, and I aim to settle up with you. You and that no-account Tom Crocker done me out of fifty dollars, and you're going to pay or suffer! Now turn around and lead the way to your room. No talk, you lowdown skunk! You let out one peep and I'll sure as hell perforate you. Lead the way!"

Without a word, Williams turned, his hands in the air, and started for his room.

III

LEACH turned with a triumphant wink to the crowd, but he saw at once that they were not a bit pleased. They had anticipated a rumpus, and felt cheated. Then he was following Ernie Williams up the stairs.

"Your name Leach?" demanded Williams, low-voiced, over his shoulder.

"Uh-huh."

"The Old Man wrote me you'd show up——"

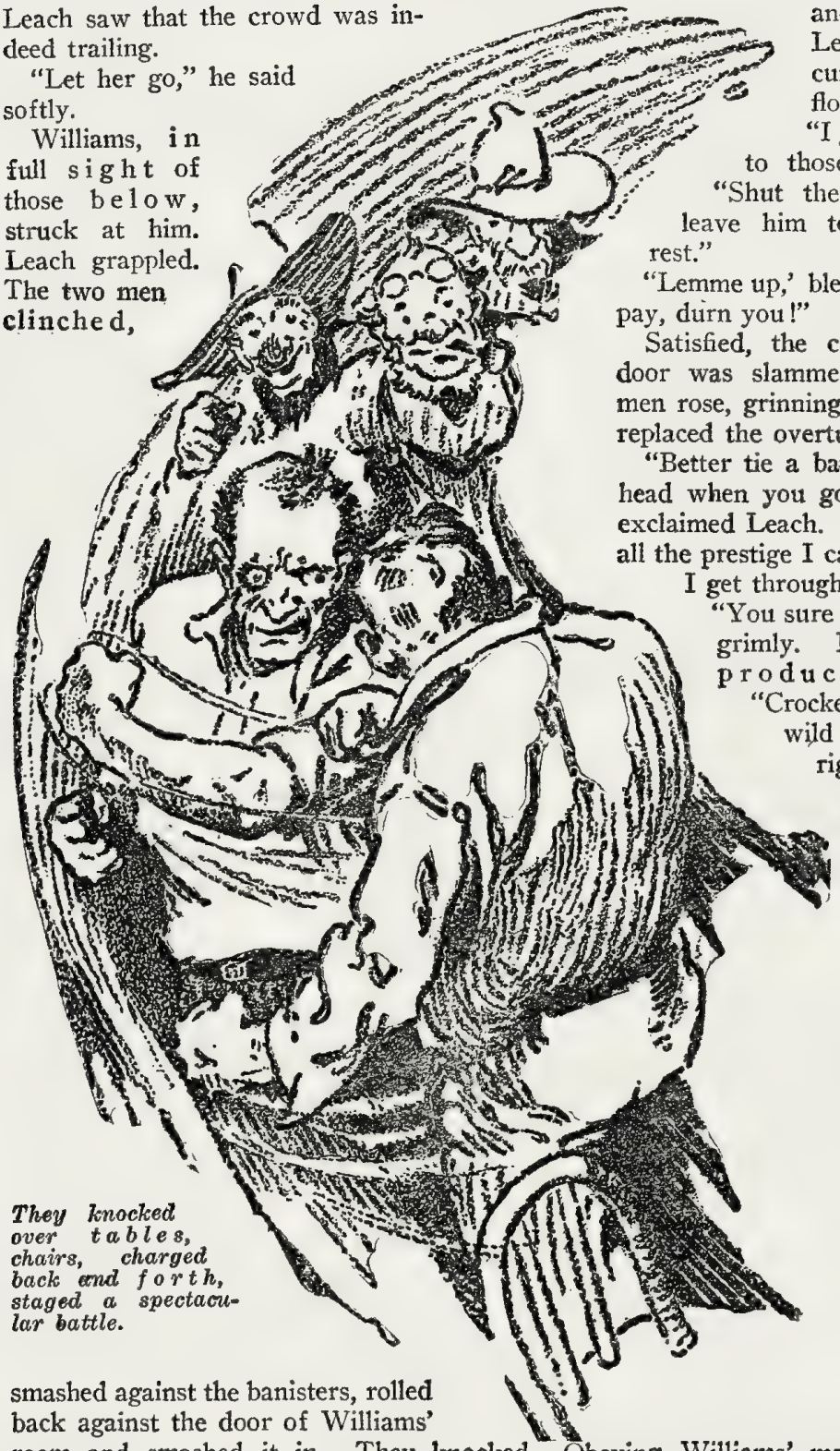
"Well, we got to stage a battle royal," said Leach promptly, relieved that the other had understood this amazing reception. "That bunch downstairs are trailing along. Get up to your room and wreck it—hustle!"

Williams quickened his pace. In a loud voice, he began to accuse Leach by name.

"Dog-gone you, needn't think you can get away with this robbery!" he rolled out thunderously. "I'll have the law on you for this——"

"Shut up!" bellowed Leach. "For two cents I'd put up this gun and do to you what I'd like to do to Crocker, the varmint. You and him are both skunks."

"And you're too durned brash," snapped Williams. They were in the upper corridor by this time. Glancing down the stairway,



They knocked over tables, chairs, charged back and forth, staged a spectacular battle.

Leach saw that the crowd was indeed trailing.

"Let her go," he said softly.

Williams, in full sight of those below, struck at him. Leach grappled. The two men clinched, smashed against the banisters, rolled back against the door of Williams' room and smashed it in. They knocked over tables, chairs, charged back and forth, staged a spectacular battle, while about the doorway crowded the natives with whoops of delight. At length Williams went down, and a moment later Leach bestrode the recumbent figure and flourished his fists.

"I got him!" he panted to those at the entrance. "Shut the door, folks, and leave him to me—I'll do the rest."

"Lemme up,' bleated Williams. "I'll pay, durn you!"

Satisfied, the crowd ebbed. The door was slammed shut. The two men rose, grinning at each other, and replaced the overturned chairs.

"Better tie a bandage around your head when you go down to dinner," exclaimed Leach. "I reckon I'll need all the prestige I can scrape up before I get through."

"You sure will," said Williams grimly. He sat down and produced the makings. "Crocker said you were a wild one, and he was right. You know what this job is?"

"No."

"It ain't a job—it's an impossibility," said the other, grimly. On the wall hung a map of Sunrise County, containing Indian Valley and overlapping it in wild ranges of hills. To this Williams jerked his thumb.

"There y'are—you can have it. Put your eye on the Bar G Bar range, in the north end."

Obeying Williams' mandate, Leach there saw a compact rectangle comprising two valleys that came together at a small lake. "That there property come on the market a while back," pursued Williams, "and

Crocker done bought her in. That is, he done bought most of it in. The old settler who had owned that and a lot more property, had incorporated it to save paying inheritance taxes. After he died, most of it went to his heirs in Denver, so Crocker come to buy it. There was a little block of shares, about ten per cent, went to an old maid relative. She wouldn't sell, and she's on the place now. It was her fought Crocker in the courts."

Leach rolled a smoke and listened, without comment. A dark frown on his harsh features, Williams went on with his story.

"The orders to me were simple enough. The ranch is badly disorganized; I was to take hold and get her in shape. The old lady there has no money and has let the place go to rack and ruin. I was to put in a crew of men and build it up; I've got ten thousand in cash, for payroll money and other expenses. Crocker didn't want to run out the old dame—he says to give her the house for life—but gosh! She's hell on wheels, feller! She done took a shotgun to me first time I was there, and warned me off'n the place. The whole durned county is behind her and against anybody representing Crocker, and believe me, this here county don't hesitate to fire a gun or two! I'm getting out while I got a whole hide."

Leach could see that Williams might be a good man in his way, but was hardly the right man to handle any such negotiations.

"The funny part of it is," said Williams, with a hard laugh, "the old hag has neighbors—see 'em there on the map? The Bull's-Eye—dot in a circle. Two young devils run it—the Ball boys, usually called Red Ball and Black Ball. They're bad, feller! Especially the black one. They're rustling the Bar G Bar cattle right and left, so naturally it's to their interest to help keep Crocker out until they finish looting the place. They're the ones leading all the trouble."

"Been trouble, has there?" queried Leach.

"Nothing but," affirmed Williams gloomily. "If Tom Crocker'd let me do what I want, I guarantee I'd have this district gentled in no time! I'd like to run in a crowd of real punchers and give these devils of natives all the cussedness they want—but, no, sir. The Old Man won't hear to it. Do it gentle, he says—gentle! Age has weakened him, I guess."

"These here Ball boys are well located," observed Leach, eyeing the map. "I see the Bull's-Eye lies half around the Bar G Bar. What are those fellers like?"

"Bad," said Williams with emphasis. "Red ain't so ornery, but Black Ball—honest, that gent will be hung some of these days! He's got a hard crowd riding for him, too. I done had a run-in or two with 'em, and it's got to where bullets come next. Tom Crocker won't back up that play, so I'm quitting. Either he's got to change his tactics, or else wait for the old hag to die off. I s'pose you ain't going to fight 'em?"

"I got the same orders you had," and Leach grinned. "No, you're right in supposing I'm not the fool I look. I don't know what I will do, for a fact, except brace the old lady."

"She'll send you packing, quick enough, and telephone the Ball boys to mob you. Well, you want me to turn over the ten thousand cash, and my letter of authority, huh? I got the money on me—couldn't trust the bank here. All these natives work in together."

Thought Leach to himself, Tom Crocker made one big mistake when he sent this type of man on such an errand. He said nothing, but signed a receipt for the money, which was in big bills, and pocketed it with the letter from Crocker.

"You've got a right good car out there," he said. "Is it yours or Crockers?"

"His," said Williams.

"Then hand it over. You can take my flivver to go home in, with my compliments to Tom Crocker—she runs well enough, if you ain't particular. We'll make it look like I forced the car out of you on the settlement; meet me after dinner. When you leaving?"

"Soon's I eat."

"All right. My flivver's full of gas and oiled up for fifty miles or so. What's Crocker going to say when you tell him Sally's here?"

"Seen her, huh?" Williams gave him a sharp look. "I ain't going to tell him. I got some sense left."

"All right. You think she is safe here?"

"I reckon so—it's mighty safe for women here, if nobody learns their name."

"See you after dinner, then. Don't forget to tie up your head like you're hurt."

Leach departed.

Downstairs, he had to run a gauntlet of queries, before reaching the dining room. He assured all and sundry he had effected a satisfactory settlement with Crocker's agent, and intimated that the gentleman was leaving town in a hurry with a damaged anatomy. Then he went in to dinner. Sally Crocker was alone at a table, and beyond a furtive grin, Leach left her strictly alone.

Now that he knew the situation, he could see its difficulties—could see, too, why the harshly vigorous Williams had fallen down hard. He gained further insight from talking with the men at his table; their tongues had been loosened by word of what Leach was about, and they voiced the general opinion of the valley. Crocker's hired man was trying to turn a poor old woman out of her home, and the county would not stand for it. If Crocker sent another man to take the place of Williams, he'd probably meet hot lead or hot tar. Old Miss Billings had got to be left in peace, or Sunrise would know why!

Pondering these things, Joe Leach sauntered across the street, after dinner, and down to the first and only National Bank of Sunrise. He found a sleepy cashier in charge, and shoved his wad of bills across the counter.

"Deposit on checking account. Name, Joe Leach."

The cashier nearly had heart failure, to judge from his appearance.

"Hey! We got to have references——"

"So do I, which is why I have them," said Leach cheerfully, and gave two excellent if distant references. "I may settle down hereabouts, if the place likes me as much as I like it, savvy? Anyhow, the cash is safer with you than with me, partner, so I'll swap it for a check book."

While Leach was filling out his card and giving his signature, the local banker came in. He had been at the hotel, and shook hands impressively with his new depositor.

"Do you know where I might land a job?" said Leach. "I ain't particular about wages, but want to get acquainted in the valley. I know a lot about cows and such."

The banker grinned. "If you're not particular about wages, why not go and see Miss Billings, over at the Bar G Bar? Go tell her about you and Williams——"

Leach looked astonished. "Huh! Tell her? Why in time would I tell her that?"

"Because Williams has been trying to turn her out of house and home. She ain't got much cash, but she's got a ranch that needs attention."

"And I got some money," said Leach thoughtfully. "Would you mind giving me a note to her? I don't much like the notion of asking for a job because I beat up a feller——"

"Sure, sure," agreed the banker heartily. As he owned a large share of the valley and was related to fully two-thirds of the intermarried inhabitants thereof, his signature would be highly valuable. "And if you want any advice from time to time, drop in and let me know. I'll be right glad to oblige, Leach!"

Leach went back to the hotel, the letter in his pocket. He was just in time to meet Williams, emerging with a grip, a bandage about one ear, and a crowd of loafers hurling various remarks. Leach hailed him.

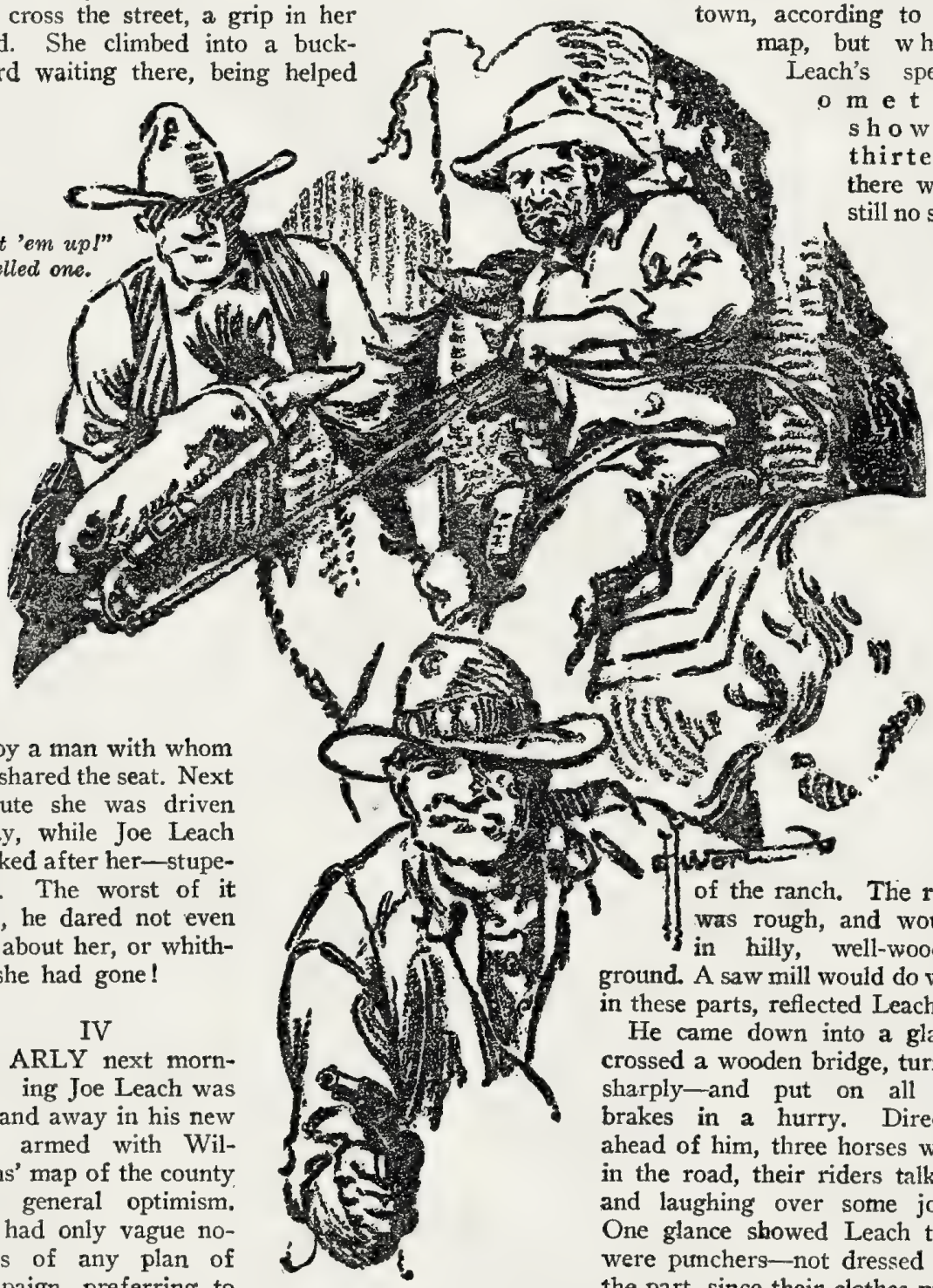
"Hey! Gimme the bill of sale for that there car, and we'll let a couple of these gents witness it. Folks, Mr. Williams has swapped cars with me. He says he ain't got no use for a high-powered car; what he wants is a nice little tin lizzie. So I'm obliging him."

One glance from the excellent car of Williams to the rattletrap of Leach was enough to raise a guffaw. Williams turned red, but played his part despite anger. He wrote out a supposed bill of sale, Leach had it witnessed by two bystanders, then turned over the flivver to him with many flourishes. After some instruction, Williams meshed his gears and drove away.

With a grin at thought of what Crocker would say, Leach inspected his new car—a medium-priced, high-powered machine. The crowd helped him inspect it, and from their comments, Joe Leach knew he had gone a long way toward getting into the good

graces of Indian Valley in general, and Sunrise City in particular.

While he was still looking over his car, he saw Sally Crocker come out of the hotel and cross the street, a grip in her hand. She climbed into a buckboard waiting there, being helped up by a man with whom she shared the seat. Next minute she was driven away, while Joe Leach blinked after her—stupefied. The worst of it was, he dared not even ask about her, or whither she had gone!



"Put 'em up!" yelled one.

IV

EARLY next morning Joe Leach was off and away in his new car, armed with Williams' map of the county and general optimism. He had only vague notions of any plan of campaign, preferring to let this hang on conditions and circumstances. The tremendously bitter antagonism which Williams had stirred up in the county seemed to make his task a hopeless one, but Leach faced ahead with cheerful faith in destiny and stepped on the gas.

The Bar G Bar lay eleven miles from town, according to the map, but when Leach's speedometer showed thirteen, there was still no sign of the ranch. The road was rough, and wound in hilly, well-wooded ground. A saw mill would do well in these parts, reflected Leach.

He came down into a glade, crossed a wooden bridge, turned sharply—and put on all his brakes in a hurry. Directly ahead of him, three horses were in the road, their riders talking and laughing over some joke. One glance showed Leach they were punchers—not dressed for the part, since their clothes were rough woodsgear—but one judges not so much by clothes as by equipment. And punching cattle in these hills probably in-

cluded a lot of work in wooded country.

To the astonishment of Leach, the three men separated and whipped out pistols.

"Put 'em up!" yelled one, bringing his horse up to the car. Then a ludicrous expression of bewilderment swept over his face. "Look out, boys—don't shoot! He ain't our man!"

"Thanks." Leach climbed out and reached for the makings. He surveyed the three with a grin, and caught answering amusement in the face of the one who was red-haired and blue-eyed. Another, also blue-eyed, was very black of hair, insolent and domineering of face, high-boned and obviously given to passion. In these two, Leach knew at once with whom he dealt. No other pair could be just like them, even had not the horse-brands shown him.

"I ain't anybody's man, for that matter," he added whimsically. "Maybe I will be, a little later, if I have any luck getting a job. I see you boys are from the Bull's-Eye. Maybe you can direct me to the Bar G Bar? According to the map, it ain't far from your outfit."

The black-visaged one inspected Leach scowlingly, narrow-eyed.

"I ain't a sheriff, if that's what you're scared of," and Leach chuckled. "I won't tell. If you boys are working holdups right along, it's all right with me—"

"I'm Hank Ball, this is my brother Red, and Perkins, a rider," snapped Black Ball, taking the hint thus administered. "We ain't holdups—we thought you were somebody else. Who are ye?"

"Me?" said Leach, licking his cigaret and looking up wide-eyed. "I'm a poor lonely puncher, that's what I am, Mister Ball. I was raised by poor but proud parents, and all they left me was good manners—sometimes. Not always."

The face of Black Ball flushed and darkened with rage. Then Red Ball urged his horse up, and intervened with a laugh.

"Never mind him, feller—he's always like that with everybody! Let's have no fuss."

"Suits me," said Leach, with a nod. He rather liked Red Ball. The face was vigorous, even passionate, but held a whimsical good-humor. "Name's Leach—I'm new in these parts. Came up here on the trail of a mean hombre, found him, and may stick around. That banker in town gave me a letter to Miss Billings——"

This news produced an instant impression.

"What about this car?" said Red Ball. "That's howcome Black got his dander up—it's the only one of this make ever was in the valley——"

"Oh, that!" Leach grinned. "I done took it away from the hombre I spoke of. He give me a bill of sale, right enough. I reckon you'll hear about it in town, if you're going there."

"You mean Williams?" snapped Black Ball.

"Uh-huh. Friend of yours?"

Black Ball stated profanely that Williams was nobody's friend, in which Leach cheerfully agreed. Despite their questions, he evaded any account of his business with Williams, and this angered Black Ball anew. He shoved his brother aside and glared at Leach.

"You're too brash, stranger," he snapped. "I don't like you a bit."

"I'm right sorry, but I got no mourning to waste over it," said Leach amiably. "I don't like you even a little bit, so we're even. Red, for gosh sake drag him off before he starts a fuss! All I want is peace——"

This appeal over his head infuriated Black Ball the more, but his brother, with a grin, jerked him aside and conferred, quieting his wrath, and flinging Leach a wink as though to imply Black Ball was not so bad if you took him right. Meantime, Perkins sat his horse and stared, and stared, and Leach glanced him over.

He did not like Perkins—liked nothing about him from his dingy Stetson to the Winchester booted at his stirrup. The man's thin lips suggested craftiness and cruelty—the sort of man, thought Leach, who would rowel his horse's mouth with a barbed-wire bit.

Abruptly, without a word or gesture, Black Ball separated from his brother and started for town. Perkins followed. Red Ball eased his horse over to the car, and his eyes twinkled down at Leach.

"Quarter mile ahead is a turnout—don't take it," he said. "Half a mile beyond is the one for the Bar G Bar. For a foreigner, you ain't so bad—good luck to you! That is, if Williams didn't give you a job here."

Leach chuckled. "You can ask in town what Williams gave me—and what I gave him," he rejoined. "I aim to get me a job at the Bar G Bar, if I can—that's all."

"Luck," said Red Ball, and was gone with a wave of the hand.

Leach drove on, thoughtfully. This meeting had shown him that trouble lay ahead, beyond any shadow of doubt—trouble with this Black Ball. From the first look, instinctive enmity lay between them. On the contrary, Leach sensed friendliness in the manner of the red brother—rather, a warmth lacking in the other. The rider Perkins was a bad egg, and a most remarkably bad one.

"If Williams told the truth," reflected Leach, "I'm going to be up against brother Perk and Black Ball. If anybody's doing any rustling, Perk is in on it. However, we'll see! No use worrying about the future, as the old feller said when they hung him."

He drove on, whistling. The road wound out of the hills by the time he reached the first turn, beside which was a sign bearing the Bull's-Eye brand burned into the wood. Then it went into a wide valley floor, with little timber in sight, and the second turnout was a broad track, wheel-marked. A little rise, and Leach found himself with a view of half the Bar G Bar ranch. He halted the car, surveying the scene.

Ahead of him, nestled beside a hill, was a tiny lake, and beside the lake a ranch house and other buildings. Timber was plentiful in spots, and so were cows; the terrain semed more like a bit of Illinois or Ohio landscape than an almost unknown corner of New Mexico. No wonder the "natives" had kept out everybody with a view to retaining this fragment of wonderland themselves!

Thirty seconds later, as Leach was rolling down the little declivity, a bullet droned by within a foot of his shoulders and plunked through the cushions of the car. The sharp crack of a rifle came from a clump of brush on the right.

Acting half by instinct, half by necessity, Leach jammed on his brakes and then slumped forward, leaning over the wheel and holding the clutch out with his foot. The car came to a halt, purring quietly. Leach, apparently motionless, slid his hand to his pocket and gripped the pistol there, and waited.

The morning sunlight beat down. An inquisitive steer stood and stared solemnly at the halted car. After a moment the brush moved, and a man slowly appeared, cautiously peering at the car as he came forward. He was a bent little man, walking painfully, holding his rifle ready; unkempt gray whiskers streaked his face. Foot by foot he came hobbling to the road.

"By gum!" he said to himself. "I didn't mean to more'n scare him, and I done hit the skunk! Well, it don't matter much—"

"It matters a whole lot to me," said Leach, whipping up his pistol. "Drop that gun!"

Startled, taken unawares, the little old man obeyed the order and then stood, staring, his mouth wide open. Leach understood the well-nigh fatal error, and chuckled at the look of unmixed bewilderment on the whiskered face.

"Partner, you sort of got your rope dragging, ain't you?" he demanded. "Took me for that cuss Williams, huh?"

"I sure did," said the other. "Howcome you ain't him? This here is his car, ain't it?"

"Sure is, but I ain't him. Who are you?"

"Cook, up to the house, foreman of the ranch, and all the riders there is left. Jim Tolliver is me."

"Oh, I see! My name's Leach. You thought you'd be doing Miss Billings a good turn, huh? Well, get your gun and climb in. Is she up to the house?"

"Yep. You a friend of Williams?"

"Not me," said Leach. "I beat him up and shooed him out of town yesterday. I got a letter here for Miss Billings."

Tolliver picked up his rifle and climbed into the car, and let out a grunt when Leach started the machine.

"First time I was ever in one of these

here things," he said. "I done held one up, once, over in Carson's gap."

"Held one up?" queried Leach. He was amused by the little old chap. "Howcome?"

"Well, sir, I was a bad actor in my time, sure was!" returned the other boastfully. "I done held up a couple o' prairie schooners in the old days, and I was in the Jimson gang that held up two mail trains in Montana. And never caught—not me! I'm too slick fer 'em. Well, I was drunk up to Carson's gap once, and done held up an automobile just to show the boys how it was done. Then I come down here and I got crippled up riding, and been here ever since. All I want before I pass out is to hold up one of them airyplanes."

Leach grinned. "An airplane, huh? What for?"

"Jest to do it. I don't hanker for nothin' else but that, and I'll die happy. I done held up ever'thing else in my time, and I want to make a good job of it."

"Well, you'd have a job holding up an airplane," and Leach laughed. "Look here, I don't want Miss Billings loosing off a scatter-gun at me—you take this letter and give it to her, savvy? Then I'll come on in."

"Sure," said Tolliver. "And I'm right glad I didn't hit ye, Leach. It gave me a bad turn, it sure did! To think I hit a feller when I didn't go to do it, would be a sure sign I'm gettin' old and losing my grip."

Leach chuckled.

Ahead of them now loomed the house, and on closer approach it was evident that the whole place was in a run-down condition. The corral, off to one side, was a ruin. The barn and bunkhouse and house itself were unpainted, but the house looked neat as a pin. Halting the car a hundred feet from the verandah, Leach handed the banker's letter to Tolliver, who took it and climbed out, then winked.

"I'll leave this gun set in the car—the old lady didn't know what I was up to," he said, and hobbled away.

A queer little old man—a queer business all through, thought Joe Leach, as he rolled a smoke and awaited results. The place was poverty-stricken, and if Tolliver was the only ranch-hand, he certainly could do little range work. When Tolliver appeared, beckoning, he tossed away his cigaret, left the car, and came to the verandah steps.

"Come on in," said the little man, then winked and added, low-voiced: "She's got a gun under her skirt, but don't worry. Her bite ain't as bad as her bark."

V

LEACH followed into a parlor painfully adorned with such objects as he had not seen since childhood—horsehair furniture, a huge chromo showing a cowboy in fullest movie costume and sporting sideburns to boot, and other such antiques. Sitting primly on a sofa and facing him was Miss Billings. At sight of her Leach swallowed hard.

His worst forebodings were realized. She was gray-haired and wore spectacles; behind them her eyes snapped frostily, and her mouth was an uncompromising, thin, down-curved line of red. Her black satin dress looked thirty years old, and probably was, and her bony contours were carried out by large-knuckled hands. She was not frail or feeble by a long shot, and looked fully capable of knocking down a visitor as well as shooting him.

"I read your letter," she snapped, in a hard voice. "What you want with me?"

Leach summoned up all his courage. He knew at a glance this old lady was accustomed to being treated with fear and respect; she was prim, neat as a pin, suspicious. Leach turned and waved his hand at Tolliver, still in the doorway.

"Get out of here, and shut the door!" he said. Then, turning: "I'd like to ask, ma'am, if you're quite comfortable?"

"I am," said Miss Billings, frowning at him. Leach sank into a chair and grinned.

"Then you'll be glad to have me get likewise, ma'am, that being only hospitable. I don't aim to get a thing on your floor, now—a whiff of real puncher tobacco might feel right good to you for a change, while I make my proposition. You see, ma'am, I've been down below, as the natives call the outside country——"

He rattled on, meantime putting his hat in his lap and carefully constructing a cigaret

above it, while the old lady looked on with a face of stony astonishment. She seemed too stupified to speak, but Leach did the talking for two until he touched a match to his cigaret. Then he started in afresh, giving her a sketch of his own life, until finally she laid down the knitting, folded her hands, and broke into his flow of speech.

"I ain't interested in your family history, young man," she said. "And you're the first person has smoked in this room since my brother died."

"Thank you, ma'am," said Leach. "That's a real compliment! Now—"

"Now," intervened the old lady firmly, "you get off your chest what you're here for, and do it quick!"

"I'm here with a proposition to unload," said Leach promptly. "If I do say it, I'm a top cow-hand, ma'am. I got five thousand dollars in the bank at Sunrise. This here ranch is the prettiest and likeliest spot I've seen in a coon's age—and there we are! You say the word, and I'll buy an interest in this place and start building it up. Five thousand will go a long ways besides painting the house!"

He leaned back, dragged at his cigaret, and waited.

Miss Billings stared at him for a long moment. She took off her steel-rimmed specs, looked at them, put them on again, and once more stared at Leach. A tiny color was coming into her face, tokening her inward excitement, and for an instant Leach found himself regretting the deception he was practicing.

"Why—why—I don't hardly know what to say!" exclaimed Miss Billings, her bony fingers twisting and untwisting in her lap. "After what that letter said, you'd ought to be straight—and your face looks straight to me. Goodness knows, the place needs something done to it, and I ain't had the money to spare, what with lawsuits and all——"

She broke off. Evidently, she was afire with the prospect, and as her stony features warmed, Leach suddenly found that she was not nearly so repellent as he had first thought her. At his whimsical smile, her lips twitched a little.

"You ain't a bad sort—I believe you know how to do things!" she exclaimed. "It's the truth this place has gone to rack and ruin, and to have a spry young chap like you to work it, would be a godsend. Still and all—I reckon not. How much do you know about the place?"

"Not much, except a lot of talk I picked up in town," said Leach truthfully. "I picked up right smart of it, too."

"Hm!" She gave him a shrewd look. "I'll bet you did. Maybe you know a man named Tom Crocker, down below, has lawed me out o' this property."

"So I heard, only he don't seem likely to get it in a hurry," and Leach chuckled.

"Well, he's got the law with him, anyhow, so I reckon I can't sell you an interest. And I'll say flat out I ain't got the money to hire you."

"Money ain't all in this life," observed Leach. "If you were to raise cows, where'd you sell 'em? Here in the valley?"

"If it wasn't for this lawsuit, yes. We've got a fine breed here. But now I can't sell a head—folks will back me up, but they won't pay out money for doubtful property."

"That's only human nature," commented Leach.

"Anyhow, I can't take you up. It wouldn't be fair to you, savvy?" she pursued, with a sigh of regret. "I got a chance to take in a boarder, and that's how bad off I am, young man. Takin' in boarders! Meantime, Bar G Bar cows are getting lost."

"So I suspicioned, from what I picked up," said Leach.

The old lady's eyes bit out. "Oh, ye did! Some folks around here think I'm a fool female, but I ain't. I bet I know where a lot of my mavericks are going."

"So do I," drawled Leach, "after meeting up with a gent named Perkins. A dog's hind leg would look like a ruler alongside that human corkscrew."

"Hm!" commented the old lady. "You and me see things the same way, young man! I wish to thunder I could sign up with you, but it can't be done."

"It might," said Leach thoughtfully. "My idea would be to pick up a few riders and go right to work—quick and quiet.

We'd maybe be lucky enough to catch one or two gents in the act of branding your calves. Anyhow, we'd get the place in shape by summer, which same ain't so far away. As far's you selling me an interest goes—hm! Might get around that."

"Howcome you're driving Williams' car?" demanded the old lady suddenly.

Leach produced his bill of sale and handed it over.

"We had an argument. He done swapped cars with me to even up."

"And according to that letter, you paid him out pretty good. Well—"

"Look here," said Leach earnestly. "Suppose, ma'am, I was to put in my money and take a one-fourth interest in the place—"

"Let me tell you the situation," interrupted Miss Billings with some animation. "I own ten per cent of this place. My brother had willed me the whole thing, but he died suddenly and his will couldn't be found—never has been found. The ninety per cent. went to two children by his first wife. They live in Denver. They sold out to Crocker. I fought it, and Crocker beat me. That's the law. As a matter of fact, this here county is right back of me and Crocker or his men can't get a foothold to grab the place, while I live. With you, it's another matter. The folks here wouldn't back up a foreigner."

"All right," came the prompt response from Leach. "I'll chip in my five thousand, for which you'll deed me your ten per cent. share of the place. Then we'll make an agreement to share and share alike in all that the ranch earns, as long as you live. It'll be mighty queer if I can't sell Bar G Bar stock in this valley—branded or unbranded! Then I've got a little more money I can reach, if we need it. In case Crocker gets possession, we'll make him pay for the improvements, anyhow; meantime, you'll be secure as to any income we roll in, and my money will be protected by the ten per cent. How does that suit you?"

The old lady's eyes glistened. "Fine! Only, it ain't right fair to you—"

"Fair enough to me, never worry," said Leach. "If you say the word, I'll drive you to town and we'll let your lawyer frame up the agreements."

Miss Billings put out her hand. "It's a bargain!" she said. "Young man, I like you. You're square as a die—a body can see that in your eye. We'll go to town right after dinner, for I've done promised my boarder real flapjacks—my land! I forgot the boarder. Set still, now, until I get back. You'll want to live here, of course? The bunkhouse ain't hardly fit—"

"If you can give me a room until we get the bunkhouse fit, then it'll be fine," said Leach. "I'll get your man Tolliver to raise a few riders—he probably knows everyone."

The old lady nodded eagerly and rustled out of the room—leaving behind her a young man who was exceedingly miserable.

Leach had won the game for his employer, but the victory was tainted. He had won it by lies and deceit, to put the thing badly, and it left an evil taste in his mouth. The more he saw of grim old Miss Billings, the more he liked her—and the less he liked himself.

"Still and all, it's not so bad," reflected Leach. "I'll be using Crocker's ten thousand as he wanted it used, to put this place in first class order. This agreement will put the full place in his hands, but it will also bind him to pay the old lady fifty per cent of the profits—no, it's not so bad! She's darned well protected. But I hate to think of the showdown that's bound to come some day. I hate to think of her trusting me, and then finding I've deceived her—whether in her own interest or not."

The sound of steps in the hall brought him out of his gloomy mood. Miss Billings came in, and held open the door.

"This here's my boarder, Mr. Leach—meet Miss Jones. City girl, out here for her health. She ain't bad, though, for a city girl—rides right well, too. I hope you all will get on and be friends."

"I know we will," said Sally Crocker, holding out a hand. "Glad to meet you."

Leach swallowed hard, and became red. Sally Crocker, of all people—here!

"Yes'm," he returned, as he shook hands. "I sure hope we'll be friends—"

"I'm going to see to dinner," said Miss

Billings. "Sally, show him around the place, will you? He's going to run the ranch for me. Make yourself to home, Leach—see you later."

She disappeared. Sally Crocker regarded Leach, her eyes dancing.

"How on earth have you managed it?"

"By lies," said Leach gloomily. "Honest to gosh, Sally, I could kick myself! I'm a liar. It makes me sick to think how I'm deceiving that old lady—even if I am binding your dad to make her comfortable for life!"

The girl regarded him critically.

"There are different kinds of lies, Joe," she said slowly. "Man's lies and coward's lies. I don't ever figure you as telling the wrong kind."

Leach flushed. "Me neither, until now. But I'm not so sure—I hate to lie to that old lady. I like her fine, and she trusts me. The only good thing about it is that her interests won't suffer. It's what she'll think of me, later, that makes me squirm."

"Maybe she won't think so hardly of you," and the girl smiled suddenly. "So you didn't know I was here? Well, I am. And I'm going to stay. I met a fine young man yesterday, and he's coming over to see me pretty soon. Ball is his name."

Leach started. "Huh? Which one? Black or Red?"

"Black—"

"All right." Leach grinned. "You can have him if you want, after I get through with him. Meantime, Sally Crocker, you're going to marry me, and I reckon we're private enough right here to make up for lost time—"

"I reckon we are," said Sally demurely. "Only, you'd better shut the door—"

Leach shut it.

VI

AS Tolliver had said, the bark of Miss Billings was worse than her bite—but the old lady could bite. Only rheumatism had kept her from maintaining her fences single-handed. She had energy plus, and no lack of fighting spirit. Beneath her forbidding exterior she was shrewd but kindly.

Old Tolliver, the only soul about the place, welcomed the news and instructions given him with a whoop of joy, and voted to accompany them to town, where he said he could pick up at least three riders at once. Sally decided to stay on the ranch. So, dinner over and the dishes washed, Leach got under the wheel of his car and all three set forth.

Once in town and settled with Miss Billings in the office of her lawyer, Leach gave his attention strictly to business. The deed made out which was to make him actual owner of her legal share in the ranch, he was careful to see the ensuing agreement so worded that the old lady would receive for life half the ranch profits; and, since Leach was acting in reality as agent for Crocker, the latter would be bound to respect this agreement. Leach's half share of profits would of course go to Crocker.

This all took time. His check handed over to the lady, Leach took the deed to have it recorded, then sought the hotel. He was to meet Miss Billings at the car in half an hour, after she had done some shopping, and needed this time to write Crocker. He did so, setting forth what had been done and enclosing his copy of the agreement.

"I don't know whether this will suit you," he went on, "and if it doesn't, you can fire me. If it does, you'll owe me the bonus of five thousand promised for reaching a settlement. What will happen when it comes out that I'm your agent, remains to be seen. Miss Billings is a fine old sport, needs every cent she can get, and probably will put most of it back in the ranch anyhow. You can afford to be generous. If you don't think so, then I'd quit work for you. The real trouble on this place hasn't started yet, but starts quick. Make up your mind whether you back my play or not, and let me know."

His letter sent at the post office, Leach returned to the car and there found Miss Billings standing in talk with Red Ball. The old lady turned.

"Leach, this is Red Ball, one of your neighbors. This here is my new range foreman, Red. He's going to try and work up the ranch a bit."

Red shook hands solemnly, a twinkle in his eye.

"Glad to meet you," he said. "I was just askin' Miss Billings if she wanted to send over anybody to represent her—our spring round-up starts in Monday."

"I reckon I'll get over in the course of the week, thanks," said Leach carelessly. "We'll be mighty slow getting started, I guess. There's the buildings to paint and hands to hire and fences to build and so forth. You won't mind looking out for Miss Billings' interest if we don't get over right off?"

"Sure not!" said Red Ball cordially. He shoved back his hat and laughed. "Black handles most of the details, and Perk—our foreman. They don't let me run things, much."

Leach caught a hint of irritation here.

"Well," he drawled, "I don't mind saying, Red, that Black and me will sure tangle one of these days. We strike each other just that-a-way. Now, I don't want to come into this county and start fighting. I don't want a fuss, as much for Miss Billings' sake as my own. So I won't come over to your round-up at all, I guess. I'll send old Tolliver over, maybe. The longer me and Black can keep apart, the better all around."

Red Ball grinned. "Feller, you're all right!" he said. "So far as Black goes, you and him can go to the mat any time, and I hope you lick the tar out of him. After what you done to that gent Williams, maybe you can stand up to Black. I'll say he feels the same way towards you, so it's all square. Well, luck to you! So long, Aunt Hennie."

Miss Billings, it semed, was known as "Aunt Hennie" to a large part of the valley's population.

Leach helped stow her purchases in the car, and Tolliver showed up a few minutes later. The old crippled puncher was jubilant.

"I got three fellers showin' up in the morning," he announced mysteriously. "And not a word hinted around, neither!"

"Who are they?" demanded Miss Billings suspiciously.

"Ollie Poe and the two Smith boys. Suit ye?"

"Hm! I reckon they'll do," she said grudgingly. "If Ollie Poe can leave licker alone he may be all right, and the Smith boys are good hands. They'll do to start with. I got a load of paint coming out tomorrow. Leach can stop at Saunder's place on the way home, and we'll get him and his two boys over to do the painting. I judged you all would have your hands full for a spell with fences, cows, branding, hosses and rustlers."

"I reckon so," assented Leach. "First thing is to get your corral patched up so's it'll hold a couple of head of stock. Got any hosses?"

"Two broke to harness, and the rest are running wild, what's left. We got a lot of old posts and lumber in the barn, so the corral won't amount to much as a job."

With Tolliver perched in back, on top of the small mountain of parcels, Leach drove out of town and started up the valley. Then he asked the question on his mind.

"What about these three new hands of ours, ma'am? If what we suspect is so, can we depend on 'em to buck up against the Bull's-Eye outfit?"

"Shucks! That outfit ain't loved much," and the old lady sniffed. "Them boys ain't liable to scare, if that's what you mean. You're a foreigner and they'll shy at you for a while, but since they'll be working for me, they'll be all right. How do you like my boarder?"

"She's a peach," said Leach with enthusiasm.

"Well, mind your step," admonished Miss Billings severely. "She's a right nice girl and I'm going to watch out for her—poor motherless thing. I don't want no lovesick punchers mooning around, neither. So don't you get too durned ambitious all to once, young man."

Leach chuckled. To himself, he wondered what Miss Billings would say did she know the truth!

En route home, they stopped at a small ranch where Saunders and his sons were engaged for the painting job. Then home, late in the afternoon, where Sally Crocker welcomed them beamingly.

"Supper's about ready," she declared, "and if you'll look at that corral, Mr. Leach, you may observe some changes. I didn't set any new posts, but I've got half of it

repaired so she'll hold a. small remuda if you don't act too rough."

"Bully for you!" said Leach. "If you'll come along and show me that corral—"

"Do your own looking," and she laughed. "I'm busy with supper."

Inspecting the corral, Tolliver scratched his head. "By gum," he observed, "that there gal is all right! I wouldn't mind marryin' her, if she can cook!"

Leach chuckled anew.

With daylight, Leach was at work on the corral, and his three riders blew in by breakfast time, with a horse each. The two Smith boys were capable, silent men; Ollie Poe was a sawed-off little chap, with a gallegher rimming his face and bright, twinkling eyes. Leach kept Poe to help him finish the corral and sent the other two out to round up two or three of the half-wild cayuses. He instructed them to keep well to the west and not to show themselves on the other side of the range—whereat they grinned and departed.

Poe said almost nothing until the morning was half gone. Then, as he and Leach rested after setting the last post, he regarded the foreman shrewdly.

"I see you got a saddle and outfit laid ready. Figger on breakin' a hoss to-day?"

"I figure on using one," said Leach. "You and the other boys too."

"East or west?"

Leach met his shrewd gaze, and grinned. "Well, I reckon we might scatter along the east side of the range and sort of see how the fence lays between us and the Bull's-Eye. Object?"

Poe bit at a plug of tobacco. "I don't object to nothin'," he said. "I got a gun in my roll, too."

"Then let's get finished here and put the bunkhouse in shape before dinner," said Leach.

The Smith boys came in with four ponies before noon and pitched in to the work, so that dinner saw all hands ready for the afternoon. No class distinctions obtained at the Bar G Bar. Miss Billings presided over the dining table, Sally sat at the other end, and, on a side, the foreman and riders filled up the intervening space.

"Corral looks pretty good," observed Miss Billings. "What you planning this afternoon?"

"Why," said Leach, with a negligent air, "first thing is to see how the fence stands and get some wire from town. The four of us will sort of look over the east line and up ebove the east valley to-day. I want to get the lay of the land in my head, too."

The old lady regarded him over her spectacles. Then Sallie broke in.

"I'll go with you, if I may—"

"Nope," said Leach. "Not to-day, I guess. If you want to help, I'd like to get a report on the west line fence up to the hills."

Sally nodded. Miss Billings, however, caught the look that Ollie Poe shot at the Smith boys, and her eyes twinkled.

"I got two Winchesters," she announced. "Coyotes been pretty bad up in them hills, Leach. You and Ollie might take along a gun each and shoot one or two."

"We might," said Leach soberly. "That's a right good notion, ma'am."

VII

DINNER over, Leach wasted no time gentling a wild cayuse, but saddled one of the harness broke nags and set forth with his three men. Once away from the house, he halted them.

"Boys, you all know the ground here and I don't, so Poe had better stay with me. You other two can circle around and join us later. I'm open to suggestions."

The two Smiths looked at each other, then one spoke.

"Depends on what you're lookin' for."

"Trouble," said Leach. "If you want it straight, with the Bull's-Eye. Miss Billings thinks somebody has been rustling around here, and I think it was Perkins and Black Ball, if anyone. They know I've started here. They might figure on getting to work quick, branding all the calves they can find and maybe shooting the mothers, so there'd be no suspicion at their round-up next week. Or they might be up to anything. I'd like to scout around and see."

"In that case," said one Smith, "me and Eddie can circulate around the upper end of the east valley and work back. Poe can

bring you along the same way to meet us. S'pose we find anybody at work?"

"Take Poe's rifle. Shoot first and ask questions afterward if anybody's using a branding iron on Bar G Bar land."

"Suits me."

The two Smiths went their way.

Poe followed with Leach, but leisurely, and after a time struck from the open into the brush until they gained the hill beside the lake. From here, Poe pointed out the two valleys coming in V-shaped fashion to the lake, with the rough hilly stretch between. That to the east rose gently in rolling uplands, studded with brush, rolling on and on for miles.

"On that mesa yonder is the fence-line, somewheres," declared Poe, then indicated the rougher territory between the two valleys. "The Smith boys have gone up yonder—if anyone's rampagin' around there, they'll flush 'em. You and me might separate and make up the east valley, and meet yonder by the big patch of scrub-oak—see it?"

Leach nodded, got his bearing, and urged his horse away.

He had no definite expectations, but knew if he could come upon any crooked work and strike a sharp, sudden blow, it would be huge gain. Who hits first hits hardest, sometimes. He could only figure on what he himself would do were he in the shoes of Perkins—and really rustling Bar G Bar cattle. The logical thing to do would be to grab all the mavericks in sight and do it without a moment's delay, then sit tight and see what happened.

For a long while he rode along without incident. At length he located the fence line, now nothing but bare posts, and some of these down completely. Leach eyed the dotted line grimly and was not astonished at the complete disappearance of the wire. It would be found, probably, neatly rolled and stored away in some Bull's-Eye shed.

He circled out into Bull's-Eye territory and came around back to the fence line again, following this. He could make out no sign of Poe. From the looks of the cattle he encountered, his own stock must be well worth rustling, but the two herds apparently drifted in company along this part of the range.

Leach pulled up suddenly at the clear, sharp report of a rifle-shot.

Somewhere on his right—his horse's pricked-up ears directed him to a heavy thicket of brush. He searched in vain for any sign of a fire, and anger rose in him hotly. He had scarcely believed in his own conjectures—only the cruel lines of Perkins' face had caused them. Were they indeed shooting the mothers and driving along the mavericks and calves, to be branded at the coming round-up? That would be the safest game to play, of a surety, but it was even more despicable than a mere theft of calves. Destruction added to robbery.

Another shot. Leach headed for the thicket, a large patch where the bodies of cattle might well lie undiscovered. Farther along he saw a buzzard circling, and another, lifting as though disturbed from work. Poe had probably flushed these—other bodies lay there.

It looked like a clear enough case. Whoever was in that thicket was too busy to keep watch, and Leach loaded his pistol as he approached. Then, slipping from his saddle, he left his horse with reins hanging and worked his way into the tangle, pistol in hand. After a bit he heard a shout, and was guided by it.

"Any more?" called a voice, and the response came at once.

"Nope. Done wasted a lot o' time in this chaparral."

"Drive them calves out, then, and I'll work off towards Black Ball."

Leach hastened along, cursing the undergrowth—then came abruptly out into an open space. Whether he or the prior occupants were the more surprised was uncertain.

Two men were here—Perkins and another, ponies to one side, a pair of frightened calves shoving off into the brush. To the right lay two dead cows.

Both rustlers, belonging to the Bull's-Eye as they did, were too utterly astonished by sight of the intruder to move or speak—too uncertain what his presence meant. Perkins was in the act of mounting; he re-

mained with one hand on the pommel, staring over his shoulder at Leach. The other man was on the far side of his horse, about to replace his rifle in its boot. He, too, stood staring.

When it came to shooting first, Leach hung fire. Undoubtedly the proper thing to do, such ice was hard to break. To shoot down a fellowman is no light task.

"Well, you boys seem to be having a good time," he observed lamely.

"What's it to you?" snapped Perkins.

"Depends on whether those cows over there are yours or mine." Leach shifted his gaze, at a movement from the puncher. "Careful, you! Drop that rifle——"

"You vamose, and do it quick," commanded Perkins.

"You two gents put 'em up," said Leach, his pistol lifting. "Way up, boys! You with the Winchester, drop her—"

Leach headed for the thicket, where the bodies of cattle might well lie undiscovered.

Perkins promptly obeyed, but not so the Bull's-Eye puncher. His rifle whipped from sight, and so did he, behind the shelter of his horse. Leach fired promptly—sent two bullets tearing through the poor beast. The pony screamed shrilly and reared, while the puncher quietly toppled over, and the two fell side by side.

From Perkins burst an oath of fury, and his hands went down. Leach swung on him, and fired. Perkins jerked backward, fell, and then sat up, clutching his right leg.

"Quit it!" Perkins cried sharply. "You don't need to murder me!"

"Wouldn't be much loss if I did," said Leach. "Get yourself tied up. Where's Black Ball working? Which direction?"

"Up the fence line a ways." Perkins swore heartily as he felt his leg. "Durn you, how d'you expect I'm going to ride with a bullet through my leg?"

"That ain't my funeral," said Leach.

White-faced, he advanced to the feebly kicking horse and put the poor brute out of its misery. A glance at the puncher was enough—those two bullets had gone through horse and man alike. Leach grimly crossed to the dead cows, saw their brand, and nodded.

"You double-danged outfit of thieves!" he exclaimed savagely at the Bull's-Eye foreman, now at work over his stripped and bleeding leg. "Now see what you've gone and done, for the sake of stealing some blamed calves!"

"You'd ought to be real pleased with yourself," said Perkins glumly. "What you've done seems to be a plenty. Bone ain't broke—that's lucky. Bullet clear through——"

"Black Ball does the branding, I suppose?"

Perkins flung a scowl at him. "Branding what?"

"Forget it," said Leach in disgust. "You're caught with the goods, feller. Want to go, do you? Then get yourself bandaged."

Perkins obeyed. "I said this was a fool play," he grumbled. "Black had to be a durned hog, and I knew it'd make trouble. But you'll pay for this killing, I can tell you—"

He fell silent, cursed the quirt attached to his wrist as it got in his way, and then finished his temporary bandage. He squinted up at Leach.

"How d'you reckon I'll get into the saddle, huh?"

"I'll give you a hand up."

Perkins made an attempt to rise. Leach went after his horse, which had jumped to a little distance, and brought the animal back, then helped Perkins rise on his good leg. The foreman was anxious to be gone, and showed it. With many curses he expended every energy to get into the saddle, and finally managed it by aid of Leach.

"Now, if you'll gimme them reins," he said, white-lipped with pain, "I'll be on my way."

"Why, sure!" Leach grinned. "But I didn't say anything about you being on your way, did I? You'll go my way. You don't want any reins. You just sit tight and hang on. Maybe you figured on riding home, but you got another guess coming."

"Huh?" demanded Perkins. "You'd make a wounded man—"

"Shut up," snapped Leach with sudden anger.

He picked up the hanging reins and led the cayuse from the opening. He knew exactly on what Perkins was figuring. Those pistol shots, entirely different from the clean, sharp cracks of a rifle, would certainly have been heard by Black Ball, and the latter was probably now on his way to investigate their cause.

Forcing a way through the brush, Leach was in sight of the open when a branch slapped the horse, which reared back. Leach turned—and without warning Perkins, slashed down with his quirt. Struck full across the face, Leach staggered back. Next instant, horse and man were plunging off headlong. A pistol cracked, and again, the bullets flying close.

Leach jerked out his own weapon, then paused, and stood feeling the red weal across his face. He shook his head and replaced the pistol.

"No, I reckon I've done enough—and I couldn't hit him anyhow," he muttered. "Don't want any more killings right now—"

Perkins had quite vanished from sight by the time Leach regained his own mount. He climbed into the saddle and sat inspecting the country. No one was in sight—there was no sign of Black Ball or other riders. Rolling a smoke, Leach sent his horse forward, and presently discerned a horse and rider approaching at a gallop. He recognized Poe, and drew rein.

"That you shootin' over this way?" called Poe, as he approached.

Leach nodded. Pointing back to the big clump of brush, he explained what had taken place. Poe, it proved, had seen nobody, but had made out the faint smoke of a fire off to the right, and had been heading for this when he heard the shots.

"Black Ball is doing some branding

there," said Leach. "Hm! You go and look over this place, Poe, then ride home and telephone the sheriff. Get him out here right away, before Perkins can bring any men back to remove the evidence."

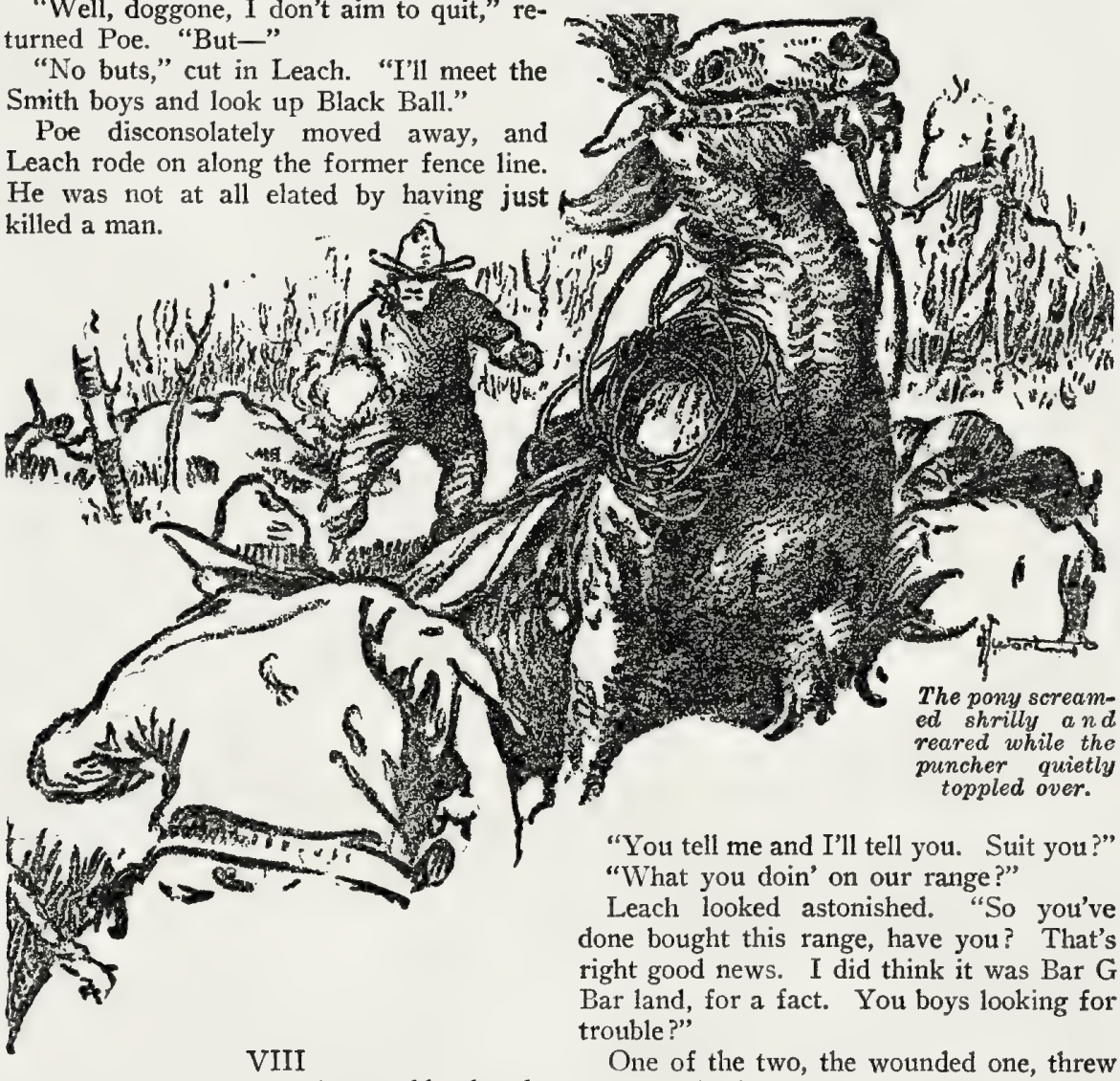
"Huh?" Poe stared at him. "And let you meet up with Black Ball? Not much. I'll stick right here with you until—"

"Either you take orders from me," said Leach ominously, "or else you quit."

"Well, doggone, I don't aim to quit," returned Poe. "But—"

"No buts," cut in Leach. "I'll meet the Smith boys and look up Black Ball."

Poe disconsolately moved away, and Leach rode on along the former fence line. He was not at all elated by having just killed a man.



The pony screamed shrilly and reared while the puncher quietly toppled over.

VIII

POE disappeared in the scrubby brush. Perhaps five minutes afterward, Leach descried two figures breaking cover from a deep swale off to the left. At sight of him they halted, then came toward him rapidly. Both riders were strangers to him. On closer approach he saw that their horses had been going heavily, and one of the two men seemed to have an injured arm, as it was hung in a rude sling. Leach drew up, disappointed and yet relieved that neither of these was Black Ball.

"Howdy, gents," he greeted amiably, when they drew rein. They were not prepossessing in appearance and inspected him scowlingly.

"Who are you, feller?" demanded one abruptly. Leach chuckled.

"You tell me and I'll tell you. Suit you?"

"What you doin' on our range?"

Leach looked astonished. "So you've done bought this range, have you? That's right good news. I did think it was Bar G Bar land, for a fact. You boys looking for trouble?"

One of the two, the wounded one, threw a glance back over his shoulder as though trouble lay behind him. The other pressed in closer to Leach, with a black scowl.

"You that new feller running this county, are ye?" he demanded. "Leach, huh? Well, I aim to bleach ye! What ye grinning about?"

Leach laughed softly. He saw that these

two meant trouble, and he had no desire for more of it at present. He turned in the saddle and directed a call at a patch of brush a hundred feet away.

"All right — you can plug the first one goes for a gun, Poe! Drop their hosses and then them."

Turning quickly, Leach looked at the man before him.

"Now, feller," he observed curtly, "there's been more killing around here to-day than should be. You belong to the Bull's-Eye outfit? Then go along home and keep off this land in future. If you want trouble, you'll get plenty of it——"

"Aw, he's faking!" cut in the hurt puncher, from one side. "Anybody can see there ain't nobody in them bushes—gwan and finish him, Pete! Hurry up about it—"

"By Godfrey," burst out Pete, "I'll learn ye to let your outfit run around wild with rifles and shoot at honest men—take this, ye coyote!"

So speaking, Pete awkwardly hauled forth a Colt's revolver, and flung it up.

Leach had been puzzled by the whole affair—it was crude, unnatural, without much reason. Now, however, he had the explanation in a liquor-laden breath that reached him; both these men had been drinking heavily.

It was no moment for niceties. If Joe Leach could not shoot worth a continental, he had a pistol where he could get at it, and he got it quick. The heavy report of the pistol was ahead of the savage revolver bark by a good two seconds; to the shot, Pete's horse went straight up on its hind legs, then collapsed. Pete's bullet went wild, and Pete followed, to land on his ear and lie quiet.

At the same instant came a slight sound, followed by the crack of a distant rifle. The second puncher swayed over his saddlebow, recovered, slapped in his spurs and went away at a good pace. Leach sat quiet, and looked down at the dead horse—the second animal he had killed within an hour. He put away his pistol and waited.

Presently Pete sat up and stared around in a dazed fashion. The next moment, a rider came surging up from the swale into sight, and galloped toward them. It was one of the two Smiths. He came up at full speed, and drew rein with an eager question.

"Where's the other one? Got away?"

"With a hole in his skin," returned Leach. "Was that your brother with the rifle?"

"Yep—chipped in just in time, I reckon. You ain't hurt Pete, I hope?"

"The durned fool went and shot my hoss!" wailed Pete, coming to his feet and shaking his fist at Leach. Smith grinned.

"You'll be the next to get the bullet, Pete. Well, boss, we found these here gents at work and flushed 'em. They had just killed one of our cows and were driving off the calf, so we went for 'em. Winged the other feller, I guess——"

"Good work," said Leach. "They were riding over here to join Black Ball—he's doing the branding. I got Perkins and another rider. Pete, where's all the bootleg? If you hadn't drunk so much, you'd have had easier going——"

Pete was already at work over his roll, strapped behind his saddle, and drew forth a half-filled flask which he proceeded to empty. He was too far gone already to pay much heed to anything that was said. Smith looked inquiringly at Leach.

"Want to take him in?"

"Sure thing. You attend to it, since it's your game. I'll meet your brother and see if Black Ball shows up. Make this bird walk home—do him good, I guess. Poe has gone on to telephone the sheriff. You get the sheriff out here and show him the evidence."

"Perkins dead?" asked Smith.

"No. Winged. The man with him is dead, though."

"Hard luck."

"I know it, but it couldn't be helped—he asked for it."

"Oh!" Smith chuckled. "I meant it was hard luck you didn't get Perk too."

With which, Smith flung himself from his saddle, fell upon Pete, and rolled that gentleman into the dust. With the end of his rope, he bound Pete's wrists firmly together, and in five minutes was riding away, Pete walking rapidly behind and filling the air with mournful profanity.

In his heart of hearts, Joe Leach fully agreed with Smith. Perkins alive was a most dangerous enemy; it would have been a good deal better had Perkins been the one to bite the dust. However, no help for it now!

Leach urged his horse forward to the swale—a deep, long ravine plunging away in the direction of the lower land. Here, presently, the other Smith appeared, with a jubilant wave of his rifle as his horse surged up beside that of Leach.

"Long shot, but I got him—seen him bend over to it!" he announced. "When we flushed them gents before, looks like I missed clean; they cut and run for it. What news?"

"Your man got away, wounded twice. The other's gone home with your brother. Perkins has a bullet through the leg. Another of his outfit needs the coroner. Sheriff will be here as soon as we can get him. Black Ball is doing the branding, somewhere near here."

Leach paused and rolled a cigaret. The rider gaped at him.

"My gosh! We've sure taught them birds a lesson, huh? And now what?"

"Find Black Ball, if we can."

They set about this laudable endeavor, but without success. Something like an hour later, Leach answered a distant yell from his rider, and came up to where Smith stood beside the ashes of a tiny fire. The puncher pointed.

"Here y'are, but he's flown. Ground still warm under the ashes. Over yonder is the signs where he flung the calves. Seen two new-branded in the bresh. I guess we got the goods on this here outfit, all right!"

"Looks like it," agreed Leach. "I expect Perkins knew right where to find Black and warned him off. Well, let's catch one of the calves and drag it along for evidence, and start home."

To catch one of the smarting, bawling calves was no simple job, but they managed it after half an hour of sweating effort, and then set forth on the back trail with the protesting calf dragging along at the end of a rope.

Since the sheriff might or might not belong to a lodge of rapid action, and hence might not show up until morning, Smith suggested skinning one of the shot cows. Leach negatived this as valueless work, but agreed that it might be a good plan to protect one of the bodies from coyotes or the already gathering birds. Smith pointed to one of the circling buzzards to their left, and both men headed for the spot. It was, Leach figured, half a mile away from the patch of brush marking his encounter with Perkins, and well on Bull's-Eye territory. So much the better, he thought—it would show that the enemy outfit were killing Bar G Bar cattle on their own land.

Having tied the calf and separated to locate the dead cow, Smith presently sent up a shout.

"I see him—by gosh! Must be the feller you laid out, Leach!"

"What, a man?" Leach turned his horse and spurred. "But this wasn't the place——"

"Well, it's worse and more of it! Jumping whillikins, if it ain't Black Ball himself!"

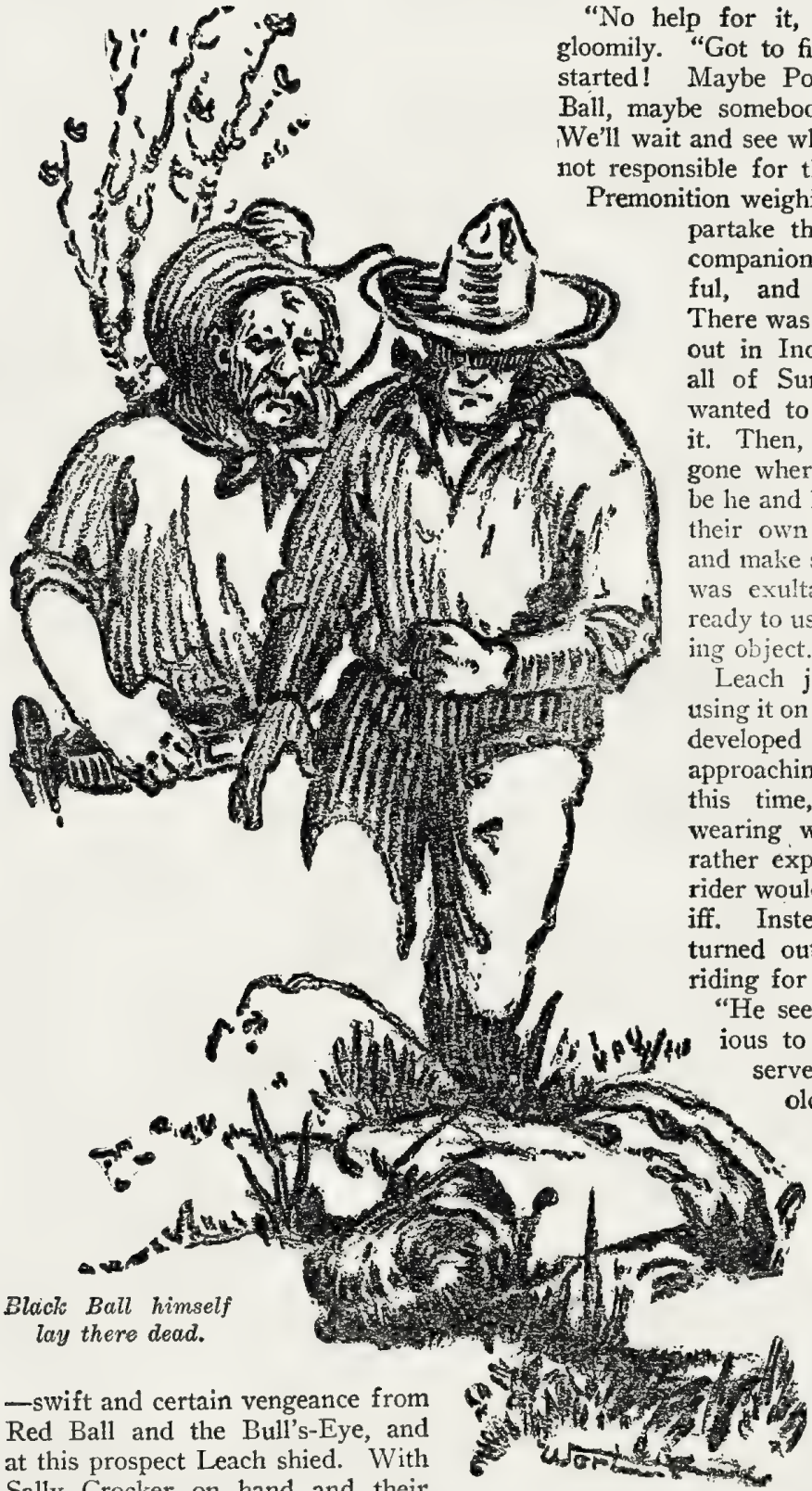
Bewildered incredulity riding him hard, Leach joined his puncher and slipped from the saddle. There in the sunlight lay a man, face down, as he had fallen from his horse. He had been shot through the body and was dead. One glance at the hard, black-avised profile showed Leach there was no mistake. Black Ball himself lay here, dead.

"Holy horntoads!" breathed Leach, staring. "Smith, how the devil did this happen?"

"Search me." Smith gave him a curious stare. "Sure you don't know?"

"Ain't seen this jasper to-day." Leach shoved back his hat and scratched his head perplexedly. "Two men killed, it's bad! And two others shot up. Luckily, we seem to be in the clear so far as evidence goes—but it's bad business. Well, come along; we'll get home, and bring out a wagon for Black and the other feller."

Leach was more disturbed than he cared to admit by this discovery. Black Ball's death, whatever the cause, was sure to be blamed on the Bar G Bar outfit. That was quite all right, so far as the law went; Leach was more than certain of his position in this respect. It meant war, however.



Black Ball himself lay there dead.

—swift and certain vengeance from Red Ball and the Bull's-Eye, and at this prospect Leach shied. With Sally Crocker on hand and their marriage slated for no distant date, he did not care to enter upon a deadly and merciless feud such as this would be.

"No help for it, though," he reflected gloomily. "Got to finish what we've done started! Maybe Poe met up with Black Ball, maybe somebody else did the work. We'll wait and see what turns up. If we're not responsible for this killing, all's well."

Premonition weighing heavily, he did not partake the blithe mood of his companion. Smith was cheerful, and admitted it freely. There was going to be a clearing-out in Indian Valley, maybe in all of Sunrise County, and he wanted to have a good hand in it. Then, after certain folks had gone where they belonged, maybe he and his brother could work their own little ranch in peace and make some profit. Mr. Smith was exultant, and was entirely ready to use his rifle on any moving object.

Leach just halted him from using it on an object ahead, which developed into a horse and rider approaching at top speed. By this time, the afternoon was wearing well along, and Leach rather expected the approaching rider would prove to be the sheriff. Instead, on closer view, it turned out to be Jim Tolliver, riding for all he was worth.

"He seems to be danged anxious to git somewheres," observed Smith, as the little old cook waved his hand and shouted something. Leach nodded and drew rein.

Three minutes later, Tolliver galloped up, and pulled in with a grunt.

"Gosh!" he exclaimed. "I ain't rid so hard for a long while. Glad I run acrost ye—done met Poe and Smith and got directed by good luck. Durn this pack!"

He turned to readjust a huge roll behind his saddle.

"What's your rush?" demanded Leach. "Looking for me? Where's the sheriff?"

"Looking for you likewise, or will be," returned Tolliver. "Come on, now, and don't ask no queries! You and me are goin' somewheres. Miss Jones says to tell you to do it and don't pause to wag your danged tongue. Smith, you can run along home and say nothing. You ain't seen Leach, if anyone asks you. Ready, Leach?"

The latter nodded to the astonished Smith, and turned his horse. He had not the least notion of the reasons behind all this, but if Sally Crocker had said to obey, he obeyed. Tolliver was already heading back toward the lake, and Leach followed blindly.

IX

JUST as Leach caught up with Tolliver and was about to put a question, there came a most surprising diversion.

A peculiar thrumming sound seemed to fill the heavens, and Leach looked up to see the soaring shape of an airplane high overhead. The old crippled puncher shaded his eyes with one hand and squinted up wistfully.

"Gosh, there's one now!" he exclaimed. "Too high to monkey with, I reckon—always my luck, dod-gast it! I don't guess I'll ever get to hold up one o' them things—"

"Where on earth is she from?" demanded Leach amazedly.

"Forest patrol, I reckon," said Tolliver. "First of the season. Twice a day in summer, watching for fires—that's another reason I hadn't ought to hold her up, I guess, but it's powerful hard to resist temptation, pardner! Powerful hard. I've always hankered after one o' them things, jest to make my list complete—"

He mumbled to himself and both men, as they jogged along, watched the silver shape go winging away to the south. Then Leach remembered the situation, and brought old Tolliver back to earth with a sharp question.

"See here! Where are we going, and why? What's in that roll you have?"

"Grub and blankets, mostly." The bent little man clawed his beard, chuckled, and bent a twinkling gaze on Leach. "How-come you killed Black Ball that-a-way? Wan't no way to do, I can tell ye. It's raised hell."

"What?" Leach stared for an instant. "Who on earth told you about it? Besides, I didn't kill him. Don't even know who did. Smith and I just found him—"

"Shucks, I don't blame ye a mite," and Tolliver cackled in his whiskers. "He was an ornery reptile, Black was! Anyhow, you don't need to lie to me—"

"I'm telling you the truth," snapped Leach. "Tell me all you know—what's happened! Wait. I'll tell you what happened at this end, first."

He went on to relate the events of the afternoon. Tolliver jogged along, clawing his whiskers, and the crafty disbelief in his eyes slowly became a puzzled frown. When Leach had finished, he bit off a chew and then delivered himself.

"Huh! That feller Perkins is powerful bad med'cine, he sure is! Now, here's what we heard—"

He proceeded to tell a story which first angered then bewildered, and finally alarmed his auditor.

It appeared that Perkins had ridden up to the Bar G Bar ranch with a demand to use the telephone. Despite his bad leg, he had insisted on going to the instrument himself, and Sally Jones had assisted him into the house. Aunt Hennie appeared, and Perkins flung at her the bitter word that Leach had killed Black Ball, then had called up the Ball ranch, getting hold of Red Ball at once. He made the following report, which old Tolliver quoted verbatim in all essentials:

"Perkins talking, Red. I was riding up along the Bar G Bar line—that old fence, ye know—with Black and Oscar, when along comes this feller Leach. We had our eye on some wild cows in the brush up there and weren't paying him no great mind, when he rides up to us and tells us to get to hell off his land. Black got mad and cussed him out, and he pulls a gun and lets go. He got Black first crack. I missed him, and he plugged me through the leg, then put two bullets into Oscar.

"You what? Never mind all that, Red. We weren't looking for gunplay—how'd we

know he'd let go on us that-a-way? No, I didn't see the other boys, but I done heard some shooting. I expect Leach has started in hot and heavy with them three riders of his. You can get him now if you get going—this was 'way up towards the lake, and I've rid hard getting here."

Mr. Tolliver spat hugely, wiped his lips, and said this was about all. Sally Jones had heard the story, and promptly ordered him out to meet Leach and guide him out of danger—if the story was true, or not, the Bull's-Eye riders would be out to cut him off from getting home, and that meant battle.

"She tells me to stick to you and keep you out o' trouble," he concluded. "I know the ground, and I can do it if anybody can; if you was to ride back now, you'd go straight into their arms. You can bet Red Ball is out for your scalp and no mistake! He ain't going to drag no sheriff into it—he's aiming to dance your hair."

Leach gathered himself to face the situation. Amazing as was the effrontery of Perkins, he was forced to admit its strategy. And, after his first impulse to indignant fury, Leach likewise realized the excellence of Sally Crocker's advice. This young lady was her father's daughter—only no one knew it.

"That's right, we'll have to keep out of sight to avoid a regular war," commented Leach reluctantly. "That is, until the sheriff comes along to enforce peace. Red Ball will sure be out for my hide! Confound that crafty Perkins—he's put a bad crimp into me! It's his word against mine, of course, and he was clever enough to get in the first report. Did they meet Poe and Smith? Did they know anything about Black's killing?"

"Nary a thing," said Tolliver. "Poe was all right, but Smith had Pecos with him on a rope, and pretty drunk too. I steered Smith off to ride around, for it's a cinch the whole Bull's-Eye outfit are between us and home right now, and coming fast. Who killed Black, if you didn't?"

"Search me," returned Leach, feeling helpless before this array of facts. "Even if I'm put on trial for it, won't I get off? I'd have every justification. The jury would know those jaspers were robbing the ranch here—"

"Sure, and none o' the natives would stand to see Aunt Hennie robbed by the Bull's-Eye," affirmed Tollived sagely. "Besides which, Poe will get the sheriff right out to look over the ground, and Red Ball will be too durned busy hunting us to hide the traces. Perkins might think of doing that—"

"With a bad leg?"

"Shucks! He ain't much hurt," snorted the old puncher. "He let on it was mighty bad, but I seen him walk out to his hoss and hardly limp, as I was riding off. No, the danger to you is that Red Ball will wipe you out before you can give evidence—that's what Perkins wants, of course. And it'll be done before sundown if possible. There—dod-gast it! I knowed it!"

"What?" asked Leach, then had no need to ask.

Something like a whistling bee had come buzzing between them, and again. Spurs went in, the horses leaped; against the wind, the distant rifle-cracks were lost, and Tolliver was over a rise before other shots could come.

"Foller on!" he called to Leach, fanning his cayuse with his hat. "I know right where we'll go—made all my plans, dod-gast 'em! They ain't caught us by a durned sight! Come on and stick close!"

Leach spurred after, startled by the imminence of the peril.

They were by this time approaching the lower ground along the lake, and Tolliver seemed to be following a cattle trail. Ahead showed low hills, dotted with brush and moving cows. Off to the left was the lake, and to Leach it appeared as though they were getting to an impasse where they must be cut off, cornered and brought to bay. Having implicit faith in his guide, however, he urged his mount to fullest speed and thundered along after the other, despite the obvious impossibility of keeping the horses going very long at such a gait.

After a time Tolliver slowed down.

"We only got a couple hours to sundown," he observed. "And we know where we're going, or I do, while they got to foller trail. These here hills are too danged rough

for horses, the way I'm going, and I figger on getting up to the head of the lake tonight, savvy? Once we get there, we can stay hid out until doomsday."

"Without horses?" demanded Leach. The other chuckled.

"Take a rope along. There's a fine box canyon up there, all level grass, and about a dozen hosses ought to be there. Red Ball won't know what we figger on, and his outfit will be scraping all over them hills tryin' to locate us. Come morning, I reckon we can sneak into that canyon, get us a couple hosses, and ride on around the lake and over them hills into the other valley fork, and so home. That is, if the sheriff ain't showed up. He'd ought to show up in the morning, anyhow. We could pick off one or two of them boys with your rifle, if you say the word—"

"Put 'em up, ding-blast ye! Put 'em up—I got ye covered!"

"Nothing doing," said Leach promptly. "That is, unless we're forced. I'd give a good deal for a talk with Red Ball himself—I think I could make him believe that I had nothing to do with his brother's death. However, no chance for it! Go to it, cowboy. I'm in your hands."

"You might be in worser," said Tolliver

proudly, and beat his jaded horse into a new burst of speed.

Once in the low stretch of hills, Leach saw that ahead these became mere jumbled masses of bleak rock, which apparently went on for ever. The going became worse. At length, faced by a steep hillside of jagged outcrop, Tolliver drew rein and dismounted, unstrapping his huge pack and opening it up.

"Got to split this," he grumbled. "Can't be without grub—"

"Here, you take the rifle and I'll manage that pack," said Leach, to the cripple. "It's no work for me, and you can handle the rifle in case of need. No time to waste here making up packs."

He swiftly rolled up the pack again and shouldered it. Tolliver took the rifle, and led the way upward, abandoning the horses after taking one of the ropes and both bridles. And now began a rough and rocky trail which tested both men to the utmost. How the little old cripple stood it, was past Leach's comprehension.

Yet they worked ever forward, now struggling across gullies and ravines, now scaling sharp hillsides, pressing on at the best possible speed. Evidently their pursuers had been flung off, for no more shots cracked out and nothing was in sight in their rear. The sun was at the horizon when Tolliver slid down into a little niche where a spring bubbled forth, and dropped in an exhausted heap, panting for breath.

"Here we are — for the night. Safe enough, I reckon. After midnight—we can go on."

A can of salmon and a bag of biscuits made supper, with water from the spring, and the two stretched out in grateful relaxation. Before his cigaret was finished, Leach was asleep.

He wakened to hear Tolliver stirring about, and sat up. It was past midnight, a thin fine moon in the sky, and on some nearby hillside a coyote was howling mournfully. In ten minutes the roll was made up and they were off, clambering among craggy masses of jutting rock that seemed to have no end.

Leach had no idea of direction, but asked no questions—the crippled puncher hobbled along with perfect confidence, and stated that he had hid out in this country more than once in the course of his long and sinful existence. Their progress was slow and not a little painful; an hour passed, and another, and still Tolliver plowed right ahead. Toward dawn, the rocky masses gave place to some brush-clad slopes, and as the eastern sky lightened, the old puncher flung himself down with a grunt of relief.

"We're here! Got to wait for daylight now, I reckon."

"Where are we, then?" demanded Leach, staring at the gloomy depths around.

"Upper end of the lake, about set to look down at the box canyon I told ye about. Let's have a snooze, and with sunup you'll find I'm right."

Leach shrugged and complied.

X

LEACH opened his eyes upon a world flooded with golden sunlight, found Tolliver already preparing a bite of breakfast, and stood gazing around.

It was a scene worth looking at. They were on a rounded hilltop, with the rocky waste behind and, off to the left, the glint of water below, where lay the lake. Ahead of them was a patch of bright emerald—a short, wide, flat canyon floor, smooth as a board. No trace of smoke broke the morning sky, no hint of any other human presence. Leach estimated it was not more than three or four hundred yards down the slope to the canyon floor.

"See 'em?" Tolliver rose to point at the upper end of the canyon, where appeared some moving objects. "I knew we'd find hosses here! That'll be your job—you're spryer on your feet than I am. Catch one, gentle him, catch another, and we're off."

"A simple job," commented Leach ironically, and laughed. "All right, old-timer! We'll manage it somehow."

They breakfasted, by which time the sun was well up above the peaks. There was now no time to be lost, for Tolliver figured that the Bull's-Eye outfit would be flung out to comb the hills for their quarry, so after rolling a smoke the two men started down for the canyon.

Halfway down the slope, Leach paused

to stare upward. A thin, persistent hum filled the air, and Tolliver flung up his rifle toward the object high above.

"Thar she goes—headin' north on the patrol! Dog-gone, I'd swap my eye-teeth for a chanct to hold her up! Can't reach her, though. Well, you might's well get along after the hosses. I'll wait down at this end in case they try to break past."

Leach assented and strode away up the canyon side. He was some two hundred yards from Tolliver, when he sensed a sudden cessation of noise, and glanced up. The airplane was high, circling there with motor shut off; thinking the pilot must have sighted some fire and was pausing to get its position, Leach went on his way.

Five minutes later, his thoughts all on the bunch of horses ahead, he was startled by a shrill yell from Tolliver, and turned. The old puncher was jumping up and down excitedly and waving his rifle. His words were lost, but Leach looked up—and whistled. Silent as a feather, the airplane had descended and now was hovering above the canyon. Beyond doubt, she was about to make a landing here.

Even as Leach stared up, he saw her bank, turn, sweep gracefully down and then shoot past him, so close he caught a wave of the hand from the pilot. She touched, bounced, and then flew on toward Tolliver, and past, gradually slowing down.

"Whoop!" The wild yell reached Leach this time clearly. "By gum, I got my chance at last—she can't get away now!"

Tolliver started hopping along at his best rate toward the landed machine, now halted. Sensing what was in the old puncher's mind, Leach let out a shout of protest, then quieted. He was at too great distance to interfere, so he set down his pack and broke into a run. At all costs, he must keep Tolliver from any insane folly. The old man was obviously a bit unbalanced on the subject of holding up an airplane.

The pilot was clambering out of his machine. He came to the ground, pulled off his leather helmet, and stood gazing at the approaching Tolliver. The latter threw up his rifle and let out an exultant yell.

"Put 'em up, ding-blast ye! Put 'em up —I got you covered, feller!"

The pilot, a bronzed young man, reached for the sky.

"What you mean by this?" he demanded hotly. "This is a government machine—"

"By gum, I know it!" sang out Tolliver, halting twenty yards away. "Whoop! I've done it at last, by goshfrey—I've done held up every danged thing there is to hold up! Prairie schooners, mail trains, automobiles, and airplanes—ain't one gosh-dinged thing I've missed, and now I can die happy. Keep them hands in the air, young feller—"

"Stop it!" roared out Leach, approaching on the run. "Lay off, Tolliver! Put down that gun, you fool!"

The old puncher swung about, his eyes blazing.

"Shet up! You interfere with me and you'll stop lead, savvy? This here is my funeral, and I aim to run her my own way."

Leach changed his course. Slowing to a walk, he approached the machine and caught a quizzical glance from the pilot, who seemed to appreciate the humor of the situation.

"Who's your friend?" demanded the airman. "He seems right excited."

"He is," returned Leach drily. "Leave him to me. What made you land—trouble?"

"Fouled spark plugs—five minutes and I can go on. Mighty lucky I found this spot to land! Didn't know there was a ranch around here."

"There isn't," said Leach. "Some local gentlemen are between us and home, and right set on keeping us from getting there. We're from the other end the lake."

"Got a war on?"

Before Leach could reply, Tolliver broke in excitedly.

"Fix up your airyplane, feller—fix it up!" he commanded. "Then you can take us back to the Bar G Bar. We got a big meadow you can land in, behind the house. Savvy?"

"Sure I savvy," returned the airman coolly. "But I only have place for one. I'll take one of you along, if it's a case of have to. Can't take two."

"All right," said Tolliver. "Then take him. Leach, you go along, and no fool

talk! I'll mosey along later on. This here is your chanct—"

Leach turned. "Why, durn it, you know I can't slip away and leave you here to face the music—"

"Dang your eyes!" howled Tolliver wrathfully. "You'll go if I got to shoot ye and lead ye into that contraption! Feller, get her fixed to run, and do it sudden, else I'll put lead into you and your cussed machine too—move!"

The airman, evidently concluding he was dealing with a lunatic, obeyed the command and got to work. Leach attempted protest, but Tolliver silenced him with a burst of profanity, and reiterated his threat. Leach sensed it for a bluff, but did not know the crippled puncher well enough to be certain —and so took no chances. Excited, his old eyes ablaze, his manner wildly exultant, Jim Tolliver might prove as good as his word; and beyond any doubt, he was master of the situation.

"You never mind me—I'll get home," he declared positively. "It's up to you to get there and settle this here business with the sheriff, for Aunt Hennie. Savvy? You're goin' to do it, too! Got that machine fixed, feller? Then you head straight down to t'other end of the lake, and beyond to the ranch, and you'll see the place to land."

"She's all right, I guess." The airman looked at Leach. "Can you spin her over for me? Step back when I yell at you, then, and hop in. If it's straight goods about you being in a hole, I'll give you a lift home."

"That's straight goods," declared Leach, stepping out to the propeller.

Following instructions, he turned it over, leaped back at the shout of "Contact!" and then scrambled in. The engine roared, leaped into wild thrumming, and the plane began to bump over the ground. Then, before Leach realized it, they were in the air.

The pilot, once up from the valley, circled and climbed. All of a sudden he had ample confirmation of Leach's predicament; came a faint "whang-g-g!" of metal, faint rifle-cracks from below, and a number of figures appeared. The plane leaped and soared, and a moment after was winging out over the lake. The pilot looked back at Leach and grinned.

As for Leach, he knew now that old Jim Tolliver had put the whole game in his hands for the playing, and the rushing sweep of air, the keen exultancy that comes of soaring high above earth, put fire in his veins. He was himself again, for the first time since shooting that rustler the preceding day; all the remorse and despondency had dropped away, swept off in the wild thrill of this flight, and now he looked forward eagerly to what awaited at the other end.

A thousand feet high, they swept down the length of the lake, following the line of the valley, and once the water was past, came into sight of the Bar G Bar far ahead. Leach pointed to it, and the pilot nodded. Even at a distance, there was no mistaking the landing place referred to by Tolliver, but the airman shook his head when Leach indicated it and shouted something about wind and take-off. Instead, he pointed to a gentle slope half a mile from the house, with some question. Leach nodded. He would have assented to anything, to be back on earth and at work, and was entirely willing to let the pilot have his own way.

Then the spiral, the sharp bank, the mad rush downward to the ground. The landing was a perfect one, and the slope killed speed at once. As the machine halted, the pilot shoved back his goggles and rose.

"Give me a hand with her, will you? Got to turn her and take off—I'm behind schedule now. This spot suit you?"

"Fine," said Leach. "And I'm mightily obliged to you for the lift, partner!"

"Obligation's the other way around for not letting your whiskered friend perforate me," and the pilot chuckled as he leaped out. "Come on, and I'll be off at once."

Leach obeyed. They swung around the machine, the airman climbed in, and again Leach spun the propeller. Almost instantly the plane was off, with a roaring thrum of its motor—off and lifting, soaring gracefully, climbing in a long curve.

Watching the aviator depart, Leach had been oblivious of other things. Now, turning, he faced the ranch—and suddenly stiffened. Two riders were racing toward him

at top speed—and the foremost was Red Ball.

XI

LEACH was absolutely thunderstruck at sight of Red Ball—bare-headed, fanning his horse, thundering down upon him at a mad gallop. He had supposed this man clear at the other end of the lake in the wilderness of rock; and to find him here!

Then his gaze fell upon the second rider, fifty feet behind Red Ball, and Leach whistled in blank dismay. It was Sally Crocker, likewise bare-headed, waving an arm to him, shouting something he could not catch. He had no need of any warning, however—the look on Red Ball's face was enough. Leaving the ranch house he could see a number of running figures. Obviously, Red Ball and the girl had seized the only two horses available, upon sighting the landing airplane.

A dozen feet distant, Red Ball reined in his horse and leaped to the ground.

"Got you, have I?" he shouted. "That's right, pull a gun— do me in like you done Black! But I'm goin' to reach you first, dad-blast you!"

He came on at a run, evidently unarmed. Leach, who had drawn his pistol, saw that all argument was useless; the man was in a mad welter of fury. He tossed away the weapon, just as Red Ball came hurtling in with a savage blow. Fists to fists, then! So much the better.

No time to utter a word, scarcely time to drop the pistol and evade that first furious blow; instead of ducking away, however, Leach stepped into the rush and his fist drove in with his whole weight behind it, landing under the heart. That terrific smash rocked Red Ball backward, stopped him short, and was followed by a left hook to the chin. With a set grin, Red Ball took the blow and countered heavily, catching Leach on the point of the chin and sending him sprawling.

"Come on for more of it!" yelled Red Ball. "Keep out of this, girl—out of it!"

Sally Crocker had come up. Leach rose, her cry in his ears, and waved his hand.

"Keep out, Sally!" he exclaimed grimly, and then met Red's rush.

Once again he stepped full into it, this time with more care. That one blow had shaken him badly—on the angle of the jaw it would have knocked him out. Now another came for the same spot. He evaded it, and drove in a second smash below the heart. For a few seconds the two men stood and slugged—then Leach had his opening.

Now, for the first time, he snapped up a short, savage smash to the angle of the jaw, and reached his mark. Staggered, Red Ball wavered for an instant— this instant was his undoing. Leach's fist cracked in, and with a little gasp Red Ball spun around, threw out his hands, and collapsed.

Leach came to himself to find Sally Crocker flinging her arms about him jubilantly.

"Oh, good, good!" she cried in wild excitement. "He had just come—we were trying to explain things to him when we heard the machine! The sheriff's there—he's made that man Pete talk—the Bull's-Eye rider you sent in with Smith. He made Red Ball hand over his gun and then——"

"All right, all right!" Leach laughed, and cut short her breathless flow of words in the most effective manner. "Now, honey, go and stop 'em! I want to talk to this jasper—no, you needn't be afraid. No more scrapping. I'll bring him along pretty soon. Any sign of Perk?"

"No." The girl drew back. "You really want me to go——"

"Yes, and head off the gang running here!" exclaimed Leach, seeing the running figures halfway to the spot. "Leave me to talk with Red! Go on, honey—I'll see you soon enough. You can help a whole lot if you give me a chance to talk with him."

"Right."

With only the one word, Sally Crocker was back in the saddle and spurring away. Leach turned, giving no more thought to possible interference—he knew she would manage to head it off. And Red Ball was struggling to rise.

"Take it easy, Red," he said, and squatted down beside the other, who glared up at him with dazed, hate-filled eyes. "You and me can have a chat now, I reckon. First off, I didn't kill your brother. Let that soak in, now, for a minute."

Leach rolled and lighted a cigaret, and

met the man's gaze steadily. If he had gauged the man aright, he would win here; if not, he would lose. Under his quiet regard, the blue eyes lost their hot passion, narrowed on his face, searched him. Red Ball, on one elbow, looked at him for a long moment, then sat up.

"I'm listening," he said curtly.

Leach took his time. He saw that the man's quick fury had given place to indecision.

"Like this, Red," he said presently, noticing that Sally Crocker had reached and halted the advancing group of men. "We caught some of your outfit yesterday, caught 'em dead to rights. Here's what happened."

He described what had taken place the previous afternoon. He spoke slowly, steadily, and gradually his cool recital had its effect—his unhurried poise, his quiet words, reached into the other man. Red Ball listened without interruption.

"Now," concluded Leach, "if your brother had met us, he'd probably have been killed, Red. If I or one of my men had met him, I expect bullets would have talked. If so, I'd not lie to you about it; we've nothing to fear from the law, in any case, and I'm not particularly afraid of you. But we never laid eyes on Black yesterday, until we found him dead. Whether he was killed by a stray bullet, I can't say. I haven't the ghost of an idea who did shoot him. He had his gun, unused."

"It's your word against that of Perkins," said Red Ball hoarsely.

"Balance it," said Leach.

The other stared at him, surprised, thoughtfully obeying the demand. Swift as Red Ball had been to anger, he was equally swift to cool.

"Well," came the admission, frankly enough, "I'd say you were no liar, Leach. I never knew the boys were rustling Aunt Hennie's stock, if you believe me——"

"Your word's good with me, Red," said Leach quietly. The other flushed.

"If you didn't kill Black, then who did?"

"That's to find out. How does it happen you're here and not up the valley?"

"I was up there last night. When you slipped us, I thought you'd double-back here and came to be on hand."

"Want to go over to the house, then?" inquired Leach. "You can question Poe and the two Smith boys. You'll find that I've told you the truth. One of your own men is there. Maybe you can make him talk."

Red Ball came to his feet. "Come on, Leach. Your word goes—and we'll look into this business right now."

Leach rose, picked up his pistol, and they walked toward the waiting group.

Foremost among these were the sheriff, two deputies, with Poe and one of the Smiths. The girl greeted Leach with a smile of relief, and he was introduced to the other men. Red Ball spoke curtly.

"Boys, I don't guess Leach shot Black, after all. Let's go over to the house and sort over the facts."

"That's what I'm here for," said the sheriff grimly. "Come on."

Leach walked beside Sally Crocker. It was a silent procession, for all were not a little astonished to find Red Ball coming back so calmly to investigate matters. Yet there was something ominiously grim in the red-haired man's air; he was holding himself in restraint, but if he ever broke loose again he would not easily be quelled. As they neared the house, the sheriff turned to Leach.

"I'd like to have your gun, Leach," he said.

With a nod, Leach handed over the weapon.

Miss Billings came out to meet them, leaving on the verandah the other Smith and his sullen captive, Pete. The old lady rushed up to Leach and seized his hand.

"Tell me quick, young feller, and tell me the truth—did you shoot Black Ball?"

"No, ma'am," and Leach smiled, as he met her eyes.

"Then it's all right. Even if you did shoot him, it's all right after the way him and his outfit were robbing me—but I'd hate to see you and Red starting a war."

"We're not going to start one—are we, Red?" demanded Leach. Red Ball looked at him and grimaced slightly.

"Ain't sure yet, Leach—but I reckon not."

"Now, if you folks will sort of back up," said the sheriff, as they came to the house,

"I'll take charge and deal the cards. Leach, we've got the story of what happened from your three riders, and they all coincide. Now let's hear you."

All disposed themselves comfortably, and Leach related events. When he had finished, the sheriff turned to the sullen Pete.

"What about it?"

"True enough, far's it goes about me and Slim," said the puncher. "I dunno nothing about Black's killing, as I've done said sixteen times."

"All right," said the sheriff. "Now, here's the story Perkins told—that he and Black Ball and the rider Oscar were together when Leach came up, pulled a gun, and let go, killing Black and Oscar, and wounding Perkins. There's no evidence for or against——"

"Hold on," said Leach. "There's evidence enough. We found Black lying a good half-mile from where I met Perkins and Oscar. Smith was with me then. Poe and both the Smith boys can testify there was no sign of Black's body about that thicket. Leaving out the fact that I'd be a plumb fool to ride up on three men and start to firing, the ground itself ought to show evidence enough, and the position of the bodies."

"S'pose we get hold of Perkins, then," said the sheriff. "I'd like to question that jasper. Call up and see if he's at your place, Red. Can he ride over here?"

"Sure he can ride—

Perkins turned, catlike, and swung his weapon. Each fired and missed.

he ain't hurt much," sniffed Red Ball, and strode into the house to reach the telephone.

"Meantime," said the sheriff, eyeing the sullen captive, "Pete, you're under arrest for rustling and various things."

This was no news to Pete, who only grunted and fell to work on a smoke. Leach, however, intervened suddenly.

"Who's making the charge, Sheriff?'

"Why, ain't you making it?" came the surprised question.

"I reckon so," said Leach thoughtfully. "But it looks to me, Sheriff, like this rustling had been done by Black Ball and Perkins, without Red Ball taking a hand. Ain't that so, Pete?"

"Uh-huh," assented the puncher gloomily. "Red wasn't in on it."

"Which would make the charge go against Perkins too," said the sheriff.

"Exactly," said Leach. "But about Pete, here—I ain't so sure. If Pete could give us any line on Black's death, I might use Pete as a witness instead of laying a charge against him. How about it, Pete? Do you know of anybody who might have shot Black Ball—anyone who had a grudge against him, or who had fought with him lately?"

Red Ball came out on the verandah, caught the words, and paused to hear the reply. Pete lighted his cigaret, his sullen gaze on Leach.

"No," he said. "I'd help you if I could, but I can't. The only feller who had any row with Black was Perkins. They had it hot and heavy yesterday morning about something, but things was smoothed over."

Red Ball came forward.

"Perkins ain't at the ranch—rode out this morning," he announced. "Leach, can I see you alone a minute?"

"Sure thing." Leach rose, and Red Ball led him into the house, into the parlor, and then shut the door and regarded him steadily.

"I reckon we'll settle this business here and now, Leach," he said harshly.

XII

"HUH?" Leach stared. "What d'you mean, Red?"

"Business. I done talked to the cook, over the wire. He was there when Perkins showed up last night; helped him bandage up his leg and so on. Now, you done said Perk took a shot or two at you, after wiping you over the face with his quirt. Eh?"

Leach nodded. "Two shots. I had forgotten to take away his gun."

Red Ball's freckled features went hard and cold.

"That's the answer." He put out his hand. "Shake. I'm durned glad I didn't have a gun to pull on you, out there!"

"So'm I." Leach chuckled, but eyed the other man with a puzzled regard. "How-come all this, Red? What makes you think it's all square, since Perk took two shots at me?"

"Well, I ain't very fond of Perk," said Red Ball seriously. "He's a treacherous, mean devil, he is. Now, you heard what Pete said, outside, about him and Black having a row yesterday morning? That's all. Perk took two shots at you. The cook says to me when Perk cleaned his gun last night, he had shot it three times."

Leaving Leach to get the full implication of this remark, Red Ball turned, opened the door, and strode back to the verandah. There he spoke abruptly.

"Sheriff, I ain't got any charge to make against Leach. I reckon his yarn was straight."

"Good," said the sheriff, with a keen look. "Got any idea who shot Black?"

"I sure have," said Red Ball, "but I ain't saying who. If I meet up with him before you do, I'll attend to him. Now, the cook says he thinks Perk went to town. S'pose you swear me in as a deputy, Sheriff, me and Leach both. I'm just as hot to make up for this rustling business as anybody. Me and Leach will ride up to where the shooting took place yesterday and look over the ground, while you go in to town after Perkins—if that suits you."

The sheriff hesitated, then his gaze went to Leach, in the doorway behind Red Ball, and Leach nodded quiet assent. He rose and put out his hand to Red Ball.

"Always knew you were a square shooter, Red—put it there! You say the word, and I'll leave the investigation in the hands of you two boys, while I go grab Perkins.

It may be takin' a chance, but I know you. Hold up your hands."

The two did so, and were promptly sworn in as deputies.

Horses were in the corral, and there was a general move to saddle up and be gone. Leach went to Sally Crocker and Miss Billings. The old lady was radiant.

"I knew it'd come out all right!" she declared. "Soon's you said you didn't kill Black, I knew it was so. You ain't a liar, young feller."

"I am," said Leach with abrupt bitterness. "I'm the durndest liar you ever seen, ma'am! But this business is going through all right for you—leave it to me. Sally, could I have a cup of coffee before we start?"

The girl vanished hastily. Leach was given back his pistol, as was Red Ball, by the sheriff, who offered to leave his other deputies with them. Red shook his head.

"No, thanks—the Bull's-Eye started all this trouble, and I'm able to clear it up and make good, with Leach helping. Every one of our riders mixed up in this rustling will be turned in to jail, Sheriff. We'll be along to-night, I reckon. So long!"

Poe and the Smith boys were insistent on going along, but Leach refused them. Swallowing his coffee, he strode out to the horses, which had been saddled and brought up, and mounted beside Red Ball. With a wave of the hand, the two rode off together. Not until they were a good half mile on their way, did Leach break silence.

"I don't savvy your play, but I'm backin' it up," he said whimsically. "You've got no real evidence against Perkins having killed your brother——"

"Look like it to you?" said Red Ball. "How'd you piece it out?"

"Well, maybe. Perkins might have met Black after getting away from me—might have seen the chance to murder him, make everybody think I'd done it, have you wipe me out, and stay clean. Depends on what was between them—you can search me! But, if you want to find Perkins, why didn't you go to town?"

Red Ball's eyes twinkled. "Perk didn't go to town—he headed off up the valley," he said. "I wanted to get the sheriff out'n the way, savvy? Now we're off. I expect Perk went back to make all the signs read right and corroborate his yarn. We'll likely find him right there at work. Come on, feller!"

Leach obeyed.

The morning was nearly half gone when the two men came riding up toward the big patch of brush where Leach had met Perkins and Oscar the preceding day. They did not come riding together, however. Leach came from one direction, Red Ball from another, their arrival timed so that they would strike the patch of brush almost at once.

That someone was here ahead of them, they knew already, from a number of disturbed buzzards circling in the air. Leach worked his way through the brush, after dismounting. He was in no particular hurry, for Red Ball had wanted to reach Perkins first, if indeed the Bull's-Eye foreman were here.

Having lost all contact with Red Ball, Leach had no idea of the other's position, and could gain none, so thick was the brush. For the same reason, however, Perkins would remain unaware of their arrival, or so they gambled. Leach knew already that Red Ball had neglected to remove his brother's body, in his mad haste of the previous day to avenge his death.

After five minutes of struggling along, as quietly as possible, Leach crawled past a stinging, stubborn thicket of manzanita whose blood-red limbs sprawled grotesque as snakes in the sunlight, and came out into sight of the same glade where he had discovered the two rustlers. And before him, thirty feet distant, stood Perkins.

He stood with his back to Leach, in an attitude of startled alarm, and next moment he broke into speech, addressing the invisible Red Ball who must have appeared close to him.

"Hello, Red! Came near shooting before I seen who it was. Why didn't you holler?"

"I aim to holler in a minute," said the voice of Red.

"Get that feller Leach, did you?"

"Nope. He done got clear away from the whole outfit."

Perkins swore in a heartfelt manner. "That's bad!"

"Bad for your plans, reckon you mean."

"Huh?" Perkins started. "Howcome?"

"You gosh-dinged snake, I know the whole thing!" burst out Red Ball. "I know how you done killed Black and then lied to everybody—you hadn't thought anybody might be around looking on, huh? Well, you fooled yourself."

As he spoke, Red Ball came into sight of Leach, approaching Perkins wrathfully. The foreman shrank back a pace and cried out in shrill fear.

"I didn't go to kill him, Red! Honest! He——"

Red Ball flung himself forward with a savage oath, but Perkins had already acted. Swift as light, his quirt flicked out and across the eyes of Red Ball. A shot followed, and Red Ball whirled and fell sideways. Perkins stood looking at him, pistol in hand.

"So you found out, did you!" he exclaimed sneeringly. "Well, you'd better use your gun first and talk afterwards when you come at me with that kind of—"

"Right good advice, Perk," drawled Leach. "I'll follow it if you don't put 'em up mighty sudden—up, you fool!"

For Perkins turned, catlike, and swung his weapon. Leach fired and missed, as he had known he must at this distance. He fired again. A hot iron seemed to sear across his body—Perkins was shooting. He tried to press trigger once more, but failed. His pistol fell.

For an instant he caught the sneering, exultant grin of Perkins, then tottered, caught at the stiff manzanita to one side for support. The very life seemed ebbing out of him.

"Got it, have you?" jeered Perkins. "You and him both, huh? Well, you don't matter so much—durn you! You spoiled a mighty fine game for me, and now you've drawn your pay. So take the final one and welcome—"

He flung up his weapon and aimed again, in thorough enjoyment of his mastery. But, at this instant, the hand of Red Ball came out and seized his ankle.

As Leach wavered and crashed down, he saw Perkins fall into the very arms of Red Ball.

XIII

LATE that afternoon, Joe Leach sat in a Morris chair on the verandah of the Bar G Bar ranch house, watched the doctor ride away, and jiggled in his hand a flattened piece of lead the doctor had removed from beneath his shoulder blade. The removal had not been a pleasant experience.

Red Ball came striding out from the house, a bandage about his head where Perkins' bullet had scraped his skull.

"I done reported that Perk was killed resisting arrest," he stated. "You back it up?"

"I didn't see him killed," observed Leach.

"Good thing you didn't," retorted Red Ball curtly. "Aunt Hennie's coming—shut up! I'll find out what I can about the rustled cattle, and we'll have an accounting with you after the round-up. I aim to settle things square. Suit you?"

"Whatever you say, old-timer," said Leach, and gripped the other's hand. Then Red Ball was gone, hurrying out to his waiting horse.

Aunt Hennie Billings appeared with a cup of broth for the invalid, drew up a chair for herself, and proceeded to feed him. The old lady was bubbling over with sympathy and kindliness, and her admiration was unbounded. When she began to dilate upon the good times ahead for the Bar G Bar under the management of Leach, and her luck in getting such a partner and foreman, it was more than the unhappy young man could endure.

"My gosh, Miss Billings, cut it out!" he groaned suddenly. She sat back, startled.

"Eh? Cut what out? You ain't got another bullet somewheres?"

"I got worse'n that, ma'am," he confessed with a sinking feeling. "I got to own up and tell you the truth, ma'am——"

"My land, you couldn't tell me nothing else!" she interrupted with some asperity. "I know a straight eye when I see it, young man. Now, don't you go to talking—"

"I got to," said Leach stubbornly. "I thought I could run it along, but I can't do it. You been too durned good to me, and it's mighty hard to know I ain't deserving of your liking. Anyhow, it's so. All this

while, ma'am, I been working for Crocker. There it is, flat out. He done sent me up here. Now you know it."

He was puzzled by the way Miss Billings received this information. She did not appear overcome by amazement, nor did she show any signs of the wrath he had anticipated. She set back in her chair, her thin lips set in their accustomed prim line, and her eyes bit sharply at him from behind her spectacles, but Leach almost could have believed she was laughing at him. There was no laugh in her voice when she answered, however.

"Oh! Working for Crocker, eh?" she said acidly.

"Yes'm."

"Told me a passel o' lies, did you?"

"Yes'm—mostly."

"Got me to go to a lawyer and sign up papers, all for Crocker's benefit, eh?"

"No, for yours more than his," returned Leach, desperately anxious to right himself as much as possible. "I acted as his agent and with his money, but he's bound by it. I'll get word from him any time now. If he refuses to agree to what I've done, you can sue him and collect. If he agrees, then you're settled for life right here. I did hope I could stay on and run this place for him and you both, but I can't do it and be lying to you all the while."

"Oh!" said the old lady. "I suppose you think you're a hell of a fine liar, eh?"

"Yes'm," said Leach. "When I lie, I aim to do it good."

"And I suppose," she went on grimly, "you reckon you've clear flabbergasted me by telling me all this, eh?"

"I expect it ain't pleasant—"

"Well, shut up and think again. I've known it quite some time already. Now drink this here broth and keep your trap shut, and figure that you'll stay right here and run this ranch for me and Tom Crocker. Savvy?"

Leach lifted in his chair, and his jaw fell.

"Huh? What's that you said—you knew it already? You knew before I told you—"

Miss Billings smiled.

"Yes. Sally Crocker told me the whole thing last night, about herself and you and all, when we didn't know but we'd never see you alive again. And we're having a new deal, young man, and making a fresh start—savvy? You suit me, and I reckon this ranch suits you, so you got to take the good with the bad and put up with me, and all's well. Now eat and quit trying to talk—eat, doggone you!"

Leach ate. He was too stupefied to do anything else. Miss Billings, who was having a first-class time in her own way, poured the broth into him and then vanished into the house.

Two minutes later, Joe Leach felt a light step behind him, and a hand came over his eyes. He gripped it with both of his.

"So you told!" he exclaimed vibrantly, a new ring in his voice.

"I had to, Joe." Sally Crocker bent over, kissed him, and perched on the arm of his chair. "I was frightened, and I felt so badly over having deceived her—Joe, she's a perfect dear! I believe I'm going to stay right on here with her."

"Gosh!" exclaimed Leach. "So am I—I guess she's forgiven me, from what she says. How you mean you'll stay on here, honey—with me?"

She looked down, met his eager eyes, and laughed a little.

"Want me?"

"Surest thing you know. Want you? Good goshfrey, I want nothing else to make this here ranch heaven!" affirmed Leach with fervency. "But you said your dad would never let you marry, for a few years anyhow, and you wouldn't go against him ——"

"I won't have to," said the girl, laughing. "A telegram came for you just before you and Red Ball got back. I opened it. It was foolish of dad to send a telegram, for then everybody would know you were working for him, so it's just as well I confessed last night to Aunt Hennie. Well, I expect Dad was in the middle of a poker game, and forgot himself. Here's the message. They telephoned it out, and I wrote it down."

Leach seized the sheet of paper she held to him, and read:

"Go ahead. Whatever you do, I back you up.

Crocker."

"Gosh!" exclaimed Leach, staring up at the laughing eyes above him. "So that's it, huh? Then you and I get married right off —and flash this message on Dad!"

"That's it," and suddenly Sally Crocker slipped down and away, before the eager hand of Leach could seize her. She halted, and stared out at something in the distance. Her hand went up, pointing. "What's that? Looks like a man—"

Leach looked. Sudden compunction smote him.

"Holy horntoads—it's poor old Jim Tolliver—I clear forgot about him! He couldn't catch a horse and he's hobbling in. Honey, send one of the boys to meet him, will you? But wait a minute. Come here first."

Already starting for the steps, Sally Crocker paused and looked over her shoulder.

"What for?"

"Come here and I'll show you."

Her eyes flashed in a smile. "No, thanks," she retorted, and started down the steps. "You just wait, Joe Leach—until it gets dark!"

Leach sat back in his chair and grinned—then grimaced as the movement hurt his wounded ribs.

"Aunt Hennie!" he called.

He repeated the call, and after a minute Miss Billings came bustling forth.

"Yes? What is it?"

"Is there a preacher in Sunrise City, ma'am?"

"Two. What you want a preacher for?"

"Private business. Telephone one of 'em and tell him to get out here right after supper, will you, please?"

"No, I won't," said Miss Billings, and then, over her shoulder, she added, "I've done it already. He'll be here for supper. Suit you?"

"Come here and I'll show you if it suits me!" exclaimed Leach audaciously.

And Aunt Hennie did.

COWMEN AS GAME PROTECTORS

Cowboys and cattlemen are the best friends that the game animals of the West have. This is true, at least, in New Mexico. Practically every large cattle ranch is also a refuge for deer, antelope, and, in some cases, buffalo, the owners of the ranches prohibiting hunting within their huge pastures. The man, for instance, who wanders onto the Bell Ranch in New Mexico and takes a shot at one of the many, many mule deer to be found there is likely to have some Bell Ranch buckaroo take a pop at him. So it is also on the old Maxwell Grant, where Charley Springer is the boss. Both these big ranches have large herds of deer on them and have thus not only saved the herds actually on their range, but have helped supply game for the surrounding territory.

Antelopes, scheduled by game prophets for extinction, have been increasing rapidly on the Bell Ranch also, and a small herd of buffalo is doing a little better than holding its own there. The Maxwell Grant, famous for the old Maxwell House on the Santa Fe Trail, not only shelters deer, but has developed a large herd of elk (wapiti), which roam at will on its cow ranges. Elk has been practically exterminated by hunters in New Mexico.

Regardless of open or closed seasons, these cattle-ranch refuges for game prohibit all except occasional hunting—usually by the cowboys themselves or by friends of the owners, so that the number killed on them is very small. Governor Hannett of New Mexico was the "hunting guest" of one such ranch this season just past and brought in a large mule deer buck.

This sympathy for the harried game animals of the old West and the desire to preserve them and protect them is, after all, characteristic of the cowboy and the old-timer cattleman. Helping save the game that was so plentiful in the early days, they thus do their generous part in preserving the old West, and the deer, at least on the Bell Ranch, seem to recognize their friends—let's call 'em their "deer-friends"—the cowboys, for the big-eared creatures are almost as tame in many places as the great herds of cattle.

"Now quit teasin' these animiles," says Missus Peters.

HOME, SWEE-EET HOME!

A WINDOW-SASH YARN

By Scott Hauter

Our old friends of the Window-Sash Ranch, Boothill Boggs, Alamo Massey, Windy Bill and the Locoed Twins hire a cook for the outfit so the goose will hang high. By the time things are settled down "after the battle" their goose hangs high indeed!

SOME folks shore imajines when it comes to grub, a cowboy can git fat on anything a damn goat or ostritch can down. Them folks shore is mistook a whole lot. A cowboy's gizzard is a dang blame sensitive affair!

That's the way the gizzards of our Window-Sash outfit stacks up, anyway. What, stranger, you ain't never heard of our Window-Sash Ranch? My—, stranger, where yuh been, anyway? This Window-Sash is a heller of a ranch, and the outfit o' cowboys on it is hellers, too. Yeah, we're reg'lar Billy the Kids—all of us. Yere's our brands: "Alamo" Massey, "Windy" Bill, the Locoed Twins—Jim and Mike—and Yores Truly and Very Sincerely Yores, "Boothill" Boggs, that bein' me.

This yere Window-Sash Ranch is owned by the Window-Sash Land and Cattle Co., Incorporated, $500,000.00 Capital. You'd think that was a generous, fine outfit to work for, wouldn'tcha? You'd imajine their cowboys'd be sleepin' on feather ticks and eatin' the best chuck money could buy, wouldn'tcha? Well, they does like hell!

Take the grub! We been livin' off a ration o' beans, flapjacks, saltside sow-belly until we plumb lost our appetites. As we figgers it out, our gizzards craves somethin' fancy, like pie and cake and chicken Allie King etcetry. What our outfit needs, we figgers, is a cook.

"Thet Chink cook ovah at the T-Bar," says Alamo Massey, who's our foreman, "he kin take steaks off a ahmy mule and fry 'em in axle grease and theah'll melt in yo' mouth. Boothill," he tells me, "you-all write thet dang Jake Baum and tell him t' hire us a Chink cook or we-all quits."

Y' see, I'm sort o' the seckretary of the outfit when it comes t' letter writin', the boys knowin' I got literary gifts. So I sets down and rounds up a few high-soundin' words and corrals 'em on paper, gittin' out the follerin' fancy ultimatum to Jake Baum, him bein' the big boss of the Window-Sash back East:

"Mr. Jake Baum,
President, The Window-Sash Land and Cattle Co., Inc.,
$500,000.00 Capital.

Dear Sir and Friend Jake:

Whereas and bein' as how us cowboys on this yere ranch is overworked day and night ridin' our heads off, and each doin' the work of 15 men, and on top o' that havin' to do our own cookin', we hereby

requests you to use some of that $500,000.00 Capital to hire a cook for this outfit, a Chink one preferred. And we hereby announces if you don't git no cook for us, we will quit our jobs. Or, anyway, if we don't quit, we will be damned sore. And that ain't no bull.

(Signed) Alamo
Boothill
Windy
Jim
Mike"

I guess that's a letter to bring that cockroach of a Jake Baum floppin' down off his roost, ain't it?

Yere's the reply from Jake:

"Gents:

Yores received, and would state when I was a cowboy I managed to keep fat on acorns, corn pone and wild hog meat, with molasses on Xmas. I will see you waddies in a damsite hotter climate than you're in now before I hires cooks for you, especially a Chink cook. If you had a Chink cook, you'd have him doin' all the ranch work besides the cookin'. So roll up yore duds in yore slickers and quit yore jobs and see if you can hear me bawlin' about it.

Jake Baum

P. S. However to keep you babes from sheddin' so many tears around that the calfs will git malaria, I'll send you a cook and I hope you all gits p'izened.

J. B."

Well, I guess that shows Jake Baum shore appreciates the bunch o' cowboys he's got workin' for him, don't it—you kin notice how he soft-soaps us along.

We prepares for the comin' of that cook, figgerin' on a spree of good grub. Windy Bill takes the mules and freights out a load o' choice groceries for the cook t' work on. Also while shootin' accidental at a jackrabbit, Alamo hits a stray calf from the Fryin' Pan Ranch next t' ours and it not bein' our fault if them fool Fryin' Pan calfs insists on gittin' in the way of our lead, we butcher the calf and that's fresh meat for the cook.

It's mebbe a day or so later that me and Windy gits in to camp one evenin' and unsaddles our broncs. Alamo and the Locoed Twins ain't home yet.

"Yessir," says Windy as him and me goes t' the house to rustle up some chuck for supper, "it'll shore be lovely when that cook perambulates in and starts cookin'. Boothill, we'll shore eat. Hey, what's that comin'?"

There's a rig of some kind approachin' over the hill with some pilgrim settin' in the seat.

"It's a woman drivin'," says Windy Bill.

Which ain't no lie. As the driver comes closeter, we sees it's a feemale all right, drivin' two ponies, one bein' hip-shot, to a light wagon. This woman's some tall and a lot lantern-jawed and long-faced and cheerful lookin' as a tombstone.

On the seat beside her sets one of these damned parodies on the dog species—a bulldog. There's also a covered bird cage swingin' from the wagon. Behind sets some boxes and a crate.

That woman she drives up close t' our shack, pulls back on her cayuse bits and yells "WHOA!"

Me and Windy Bill pulls off our hats respectfull-like and murmurs, "Howdy, marm."

The stranger she examines us from head to foot like a feller examinin' a yearlin' what he figgers by rights ought t' be wearin' his brand but ain't, and she don't appear to be overjoyed a whole lot at us.

"A hell of a lookin' country, a hell of a lookin' ranch, and a hell of a lookin' pair of cowboys!" she sort o' hands out as her verdict.

"Are yuh headin' for somewheres in particular, marm?" I inquires. "If so, we kin direct yuh to it, me and Windy bein' old inhabitants round yere."

"If you fellers are old inhabitants of any place," she observes some sharp, "it must be account o' a shortage in rope t' stretch yore necks with. I'm headin' for the Window-Sash Ranch. Is this her?"

"She is," I cheeps.

Me and Windy both has a sort o' sinkin' feelin' when we has t' admit this. We feels calamity, disaster, bad luck and a lot o' other things crowdin' in on our range.

"M' name's Missus Betsy Peters and I been hired by Jake Baum to rustle grub for you loafers," she says. "Now what do yuh know about that?" she inquires some hostile-like.

Me and Windy Bill don't know nothin' about that, but we feels there's been a misdeal somewhere.

"Cook?" says Windy Bill sort o' dazed.

"Cook?" I says sort o' feeble. "What, you?"

"Yes, COOK! Yes, ME!" she bawls at us. "C-double-o-k, COOK! Can't you bozers drop yore loop on that idee and tie it t' the snubbin' post? And yuh might's well know I lays down the law around a house, when I'm in it, and the fu'st bowlegs what tracks mud in on my kitchen floor will wake up to find hisself bein' fitted with a pair o' wings. I kin shoot as well as I kin cook," she says sort o' significant, "an' I ain't much choosey whether I fills stomacks with lead or grub."

She yanks the cover off the bird coop. In it is one of these red and yeller and green drunkard's dream of a bird—one of these parrots. The critter lets out a squawk.

"C-RRRRRRRRK!" that parrot screeches. "WHAT IS HOME WITHOUT A MOTHER? AWK!"

"Quite right, Dan'l Webster," says Missus Peters to the parrot. "Come, Romeo," she says as she lifts the bulldog down from the wagon seat.

Dan'l Webster and Romeo! Ain't them some hell of a pair names for a parrot and a bulldog? Well, as we afterwards finds out, they're a hell of a parrot and bulldog, too.

"What yuh starin' at? Unhitch these hosses!" Missus Betsy Peters bawls at Windy and me. "My goat, Julius Caesar, is in that crate. Unload that goat and feed him some hay. And don't tease him none. And move,

"I sails through the air."

yuh bow-legged gazabos, before I gits peeved and unlimbers my artillery."

We drives the wagon down to the corrals and unhitches them lousy cayuses. Then we lifts off the crate with the goat in it.

It's shore a scrawny, dejected-lookin' specimen of goat. We boots him out o' the crate and he wobbles out sad-like, his whiskers trailin' on the ground.

"He won't live long—that's one consolation about havin' him around," I remarks. "Julius Caesar! Ain't that a hell of a name for a goat, Windy?"

"Yeh, well it's a hell of a goat, too," says Windy.

Me and Windy Bill turns and walks away from there. I took about five steps, when "Bam!" somethin' busts me in the rear and boosts me off my feet. I sails through the air and lands spraddled out over considerable scenery.

"Haw! Haw!" laughs Windy Bill. "Julius Caesar is a playful little goat, ain't he? Haw! Haw!"

Just then there sounds a "Woof-Woof-rrr!" and around the corner of the stable comes Romeo, the bulldog. He heads for me and Windy like he's plumb in earnest. There's part of a scantlin' work from a old stable still standin' close by. I takes three leaps and climbs up on that scantlin' and hangs by one leg and one arm from a two-by-four. Windy he likewise makes it into a tree and roosts on a limb. Romeo starts dashin' back from me to Windy and back from Windy to me invitin' us t' come down.

"Git a rope and lasso him!" suggests Windy.

"S'posin' you git it," I suggests.

"Help! Missus Peters!" we yowls at the house. "Help!"

Missus Betsy Peters opens the door and sticks out her nose.

"Quit teasin' them animiles!" she shouts and slams the door shut. Before it shuts we hears the parrot, Dan'l Webster, let out a "CRRRRRRK—WHAT IS HOME WITHOUT A MOTHER? AWK!"

Alamo Massey rambles home while Romeo is still keepin' a eye on me and Windy. Romeo seein' Alamo on horseback don't bother him none. Julius Caesar, the goat, he's in the stable chewin' hay.

"What's the matter with yuh locoed knotheads?" ask Alamo. "What you-all doin' up theah?"

"The cook has arrived," I explains.

"What's thet got t' do with you-all roostin' up theah?" asks Alamo, puzzled-like. "Expect him t' come out and feed yuh some bird seed?"

Alamo turns his back t' the stable as he gits off his pony. That's a whale of a mistake. Turnin' yore back at any time is a hell of a big mistake with that goat around. Me and Windy yells t' warn Alamo as that goat streaks it out from the stable, but it's too late. That goat hits Alamo in the rear, slammin' him up ag'in his hoss. The pony bolts, steppin' over and across and mebbe on Alamo. On top o' that the bulldog mutters "Woof-Woof-rrrr!" and dashes for Alamo. That goat and bulldog shore is a fine team: fu'st the goat bams 'em and then the bulldog chases 'em.

Me and Windy never had no idee old Alamo could waggle his legs so fast. Alamo beats Romeo by a hair, leapin' for the scantlin' and pullin' hisself up beside me. Alamo wants to know what the blankety-blank all this means.

"It means a cook and billy-goat and a bulldog called Romeo has settled in our midst," I says as I shifts from hangin' by my right leg and tries hangin' from my left a while.

"Theah won't be no goats or cooks or dawgs on this heah ranch when I gits my gun," predicts Alamo. "I'll kill thet goat and dog, and make thet cook eat 'em hide and tail."

Just then Missus Peters opens the door of the shack. She sees us danglin' around down there with Julius Caesar and Romeo amblin' around below us.

"Yuh bow-legged galoots, quit teasin' Romeo and Julius Caesar or I'll perforate yuh up!" she warns us.

"But, marm!" I hollers, "we ain't teasin' —"

"CRRRRRRKKK! WHAT IS HOME WITHOUT A MOTHER? AWK!" goes the parrot. "Slam!" goes the door.

"Who the hell is thet feemale?" asks Alamo comin' out of a daze.

"It's the cook, Alamo," I informs him.

"Cook! But it's a she?" he objects. "We didn't tell Jake Baum we wanted a she-cook. This heah West is a country wheah men is men."

"You're mistook a whole lot there, Alamo," I tells him. "The West is a country where wimmen is wimmen and men ain't nothin' but insignificant tadpoles and doormats."

Romeo he sets down and keeps a eye on us, while Julius Caesar chews thoughtful-like on some more hay.

Right after that them pair of young idjits, the Locoed Twins—Mike and Jim—comes stragglin' in. Them noodles eyes us solemn-like.

"They think they're squirrels, Jim, that's the way I figgers it out," observes the Mike Twin.

"No, that ain't it," says the Jim Twin. "Don'tcha know these old-time cowboys always roosts in trees at night to keep away from the rattlesnakes?"

Me and Alamo and Windy Bill don't say nothin'. We wants t' see what happens. She happens all right—soon's them young peanuts steps off their horses.

The billy-goat hits Jim in the rear liftin' him into the air and Jim he lights stretchin' it out for the corral. Romeo he dashes out and grabs the other Twin unexpected by a leg. Mike sheds his chaps and swings up on the stable roof like a monkey.

"What's the joke?" yelps both Twins. "What's this?"

"This? Oh, this," I says rollin' me a cigarette satisfied-like, "why this is just life on a great cow ranch in the Far West."

The billy-goat he comes over and starts chewin' sort o' reflectful-like on them chaps Jim shed. Jim lets out a yowl.

"Git away from my chaps, you slab-sided ornary, stinkin' cannibal!" yells Jim.

"Me and Windy never had no idea old Alamo could waggle his legs so fast."

"Vamos!" He starts to climb down, but Romeo makes a dive for him and Jim climbs back on the top corral rail while the goat he shuts one eye and chews on them chaps like it's the tastiest thing he ever et.

All five of us raises a yowl at the house, hopin' t' git Missus Betsy Peters' attention, none of us havin' a gun on us.

The door of the house opens.

"Supper!" bawls Missus Peters.

"But, marm,' hollers Windy, "we can't come t' supper. Yore dog and yore goat has got us all—"

"Slam!" goes the door. Missus Peters don't pay no attention t' us. We raises our voices ag'in but it don't do no good. In about ten minutes she scrapes pans and pots at the back door and the goat, J. Caesar, and the bull-purp, Romeo, races up there for their supper. That gives us our chancet t' escape. We climbs down hasty-like and lopes up t' the house also t' git our supper. We washes our faces and hustles for the kitchen. We got one comfort in all this trouble: there'll be some feed on the table. A woman like that is bound to be a good cook.

"What do you hobos want?" she demands as we stick our noses in at the door.

"Supper, marm, a-hem," I says.

"When I calls supper, a-hem," she returns snappy-like, "I wants yuh appearin' for supper immedjit. Supper's over, a-hem, yuh bow-legged galoots. Git out o' yere afore I brain yuh with a hunk o' stove wood. And take yore blankets off yore bunks and git 'em outa the house. Yuh can't sleep in yere."

We does it. And as we're packin' out our beddin', the parrot, Dan'l Webster, speaks. "C-RRRRRRRRK! WHAT IS HOME WITHOUT A MOTHER? AWK!" he says real conversational-like.

We spreads our blankets in a shed near the stable and bunks there, determined not t' miss the call for breakfast. We shore don't either, the reason bein' that we git woke up before breakfast by the world startin' t' come to a end.

The shed we're sleepin' in has got a tin roof, and take it from us Window-Sashers it's a hell of a mistake to sleep in a place with a tin roof.

About 3 A. M. it sounds like the moon has run smack into the earth, jarrin' loose the insides o' both. A terrible bammin' and hammerin' is bustin' on our ears.

"Earthquake!" yowls the Mike Twin.

"Injuns!" screeches Windy Bill.

"Landslide!" ejaculates Alamo sudden.

Not that we're stoppin' t' discuss the matter none; we're all five of us hittin' it for the door. We gits there at oncet and goes on through.

"Woof-Grrrrrrr!" we hears that bulldog Romeo remark satisfied-like as we boils out of that shed, and he begins bitin' shins. That noise we heard was only that damned goat climbin' around on top the tin roof and scarin' us out doors where Romeo was waitin' for us. Some team work Romeo and J. Caesar puts up.

For two minutes that ranch boils over with excitement. The scenery is full of Romeo and cowboys goin' round and round.

"Bang!" sounds a six-shooter from the house and lead sings over our heads. We dashes back into the shed and slams the door.

"Yuh hear me!" Missus Peters bawls at us. "Quit teasin' my pets or there'll be some funerals held yere!"

That's why we don't miss breakfast. Before we can git t' snorin' ag'in Missus Peters yowls breakfast and we sprints up there. We figgers, anyway, that breakfast will make up for all our trouble. We been livin' on flapjacks for breakfast so long, that whatever Missus Peters serves, it will shore be a treat. We figgers that meal will simply bring tears t' our eyes. It takes a hell of a meal to make us longhorns weep, but we figgers the breakfast will do it.

Well, it does, too. We sets down and there in the middle of the table rests a stack of flapjacks. And nothin' else t' eat but coffee. I sink my teeth in a flapjack and I makes quite a dent in that flapjack, too, but the dent don't last. The flapjack springs right back. That feemale shore has a substitute for rubber and leather what would 'a' made her fortune.

"No wonder that dang bulldog is got such a mean temper!" says Windy Bill t' me. "This cookin' would sour anybody."

"What's that yuh said?" snaps Missus Peters.

"I said I never saw no such tender, delicious flapjacks, ma'am," lies Windy Bill hasty-like.

"Yeah, I'll say yuh didn't," she declares. "I'm a cook, I am. I cooked for Pat Talbert

of the Bar-X Ranch before he died, and I cooked for Col. Tilden of the Three-S Ranch before he died, and I cooked for the Hankins Brothers over on the San Juan River before they both died."

"CRRRRRRK! WHAT IS HOME WITHOUT A MOTHER? AWK!" goes the parrot.

We gives up the struggle with the flapjacks and walks out sort o' still chewin' on 'em. We ketches our horses, saddles up and rides out t' where we can hold a council o' war with no goat or dog bustin' in on us.

As usual, it's me that finds the solution. I don't know why I wastes brains like mine on a cow ranch. It's a damned shame, that's all.

"Our only chancet is t' find her husband what left her and bring him back," I suggests after we have discussed various means of gittin' rid of Missus Peters.

"How do yuh know he left her, Boothill?" asks Alamo.

"She's the kind what husbands leave," I tells him. "Wouldn't any man leave a wife like that, I ask yuh?"

"That's damned reasonable," says Windy. "But how we goin' to find her husband? I bet that hombre's still goin'."

"Investigate all the Peterses we know," I remarks. "For example, there's a prospector named Peters tunnelin' over in Eagle Canyon. Mebbe that's the feller. Of course, it's only a chancet, but who wouldn't take a chancet in a case like this?"

We all rides over to Eagle Canyon to interview that prospector, sort of wavin' our six-shooters under his nose as he comes out o' his tunnel. He's homely-mugged, meek-lookin', and plumb hypnotized by our guns.

"Peters, did you or did you not go off and leave a pore, helpless wife oncet—leave her plumb flat?" I inquires.

"Why—er—how'd you know it?" he asks. "I ain't sayin' I did, but if I did, I had reasons."

"We shore has our reasons also—some damned strong reasons," I says. "You come with us."

"Victory has perched on our banners," says Windy Bill like a damned poet. "Also considerable luck. We'll restore Missus Peters's husband to her and see that he supports her after this so she won't have to cook for a livin'."

We journeys back, takin' this Peters feller along with us. He kicks a lot, but it's a lot better t' sackerfice one man 'stead o' five.

"Marm, we-all found yore long-lost husband," is the way Alamo busts the joyful news t' Missus Peters.

"That's strange," she remarks. "Very strange. So you've found my husband? Yes, it's very strange. Very!"

"What's strange about it, marm?" I asks.

"My husband's been dead for five years," she says.

"You're sure this ain't him?" we asks, that bein' a sort of a blow.

"Natcherally," she remarks.

"I could 'a' told you I wasn't the Peters you wanted," says this Peters aggrieved-like. "My wife divorced me ten years ago."

Well, that's shore lucky for Peters, ain't it—his bein' the wrong Peters, I mean? We asks him t' stay for dinner and he accepts.

"Keep away from that parrot," we warns him. "He'll take a piece o' meat outa yore ear."

"Not a beautiful bird like that, shorely," he says.

"Beautiful is right," Missus Peters chimes in real pleased-like. "That parrot is a beautiful talker, too, and he's got more sense than any cowboy I ever saw."

"C-RRRRRRK—WHAT IS HOME WITHOUT A MOTHER—AWK!" ejaculates Dan'l Webster as if he's pleased about something.

"A noble sentiment," observes Peters.

He eats dinner with us and praises Missus Peters on the chow she dishes up. She seems to take a likin' t' him and bids him a friendly farewell when he leaves.

"Good-by, Mr. Peters," she says, "I wisht I'd met you instead of the Peters who kicked the bucket."

Well, we wisht so too, but that don't help us none now and Peters heads back for his cabin in Eagle Canyon. After he's gone, we can't help but consider the happy life that prospector feller leads.

Meanwhile things git worse and worse

on the ranch. Missus Peters gits more snappy and Romeo and Julius gits more vicious.

"When I thinks of that prospector livin' alone in Eagle Canyon without no goat or dog around and cookin' his own grub the way he wants it," I remarks, "it makes me feel like us cowboys lives the lifes of slaves yere."

"Hell, I agrees with you there," says Windy Bill.

So does Alamo and the Locoed Twins. My—, if Missus Peters ain't cookin' grub what busts out yore teeth, that dang goat or bulldog or parrot is pesterin' us. And we can't even look cross-eyed at them critters without Missus Peters bawlin' us out.

"Yessir, the life of a prospector is the ideal life t' lead," I insists. "Think of that Peters, smokin' his pipe in the house when he wants and spittin' on the stove if he feels like it. I got a idee. Let's us quit this damned cowboyin' and start prospectin' down in Eagle Canyon, too."

"A great idee," says Alamo. "Boothill, yuh shore assays traces of brains sometimes."

With us Window-Sashers, to think is to act. We stays away from the ranch till dark, then sneaks in and without wakin' up Missus Peters, we packs a coupla mules and sneaks off. We camps that night and next mornin' we drops down into Eagle Canyon intendin' to establish quarters close t' the cabin of this Peters feller.

There's smoke comin' from the chimney and we rides up and dismounts.

Around the corner there's a sudden bleat and yere a goat comes at us full speed. It's Julius Caesar.

"Woof-grrrrr!" comes a growl and trailin' after that goat and headin' for us comes that bulldog Romeo. We all leaps hasty on our hosses again. That Peters feller opens the door.

"Why, howdy, boys," he says. "How'd you find out?"

"Find out what?" we asks. "And how come this damned menagerie is down yere?"

"Boys," he says, "I hated t' rob yuh of a cook and her playful pets, but yestidday me and Missus Peters we eloped and got married and she's moved down yere now."

"Yeah?" we says sort o' feeble-like.

"Yeah," he says. "I tell you, boys, it was this way. When I seen what a sociable fam'ly life yuh led on the ranch with them pet animiles around and that queenly woman cookin' for yuh and keepin' house, I made up my mind this prospectin' alone down yere and doin' my own cookin' had t' end."

Well, it's a difference of opinion what causes wars, don't it? Me and Windy and the Twins and Alamo heads for home feelin' plumb flabbergasted. Just as we leaves, we hears the parrot in the house clear it's dod-gasted throat.

"C-RRRRRRK—WHAT IS HOME WITHOUT A MOTHER—AWK!" he says.

Soon's we git back to our shack, on the orders of Alamo and the rest, I writes a letter t' Jake Baum, the big boss back East. Our outfit feels we stood about enough from that hombre and we don't intend to stand no more.

The letter's as folls.:

"Jake Baum,
President, The Window-Sash Land and
Cattle Co., Inc.,
$500,000.00 Capital

Dear Sir & Friend:

This is to notify you that we don't need no cook around this ranch, as we ain't invalids what needs somebody to cook for us, and if you sends us any more cooks, we will shore quit our jobs.

Windy
Alamo
Mike
Jim
Boothill

P. S. And this ain't no bull either."

Dover started out for Honey Combs with his string of buckskins

THAT BUCKSKIN STRING

By Glenn A. Connor

Dover pits his buckskins against Delaney's black Morgans in the pursuit of Highlander, a wild horse, which is no mean quarry to get a rope on. But Dover sure pins his faith on his buckskins.

CHAPTER I

TOMMY WORTHINGTON, lolling in the shade of the giant cottonwood in front of the ranch house, regarded the two approaching riders with a feeling of mingled triumph and regret; triumph because another had failed where they, the Rocker D riders, had failed; regret because of the disappointment his news would cause one of the oncoming riders. He recognized in the rolling, rotund figure of one of the forms Pa Bailey, owner of the Rocker D.

The two riders were heading for the nearby corral. Worthington rose to his feet and sauntered forward to intercept them. "Might as well get it off my chest first as last," he muttered.

Bailey cast his rider a casual glance, then dragged his horse to a sharp halt. He knew from the expression on Worthington's face that something was amiss. Of late Bailey had acquired a manner both nervous and irritable, a manner so strange in comparison with his usual bluff good humor that it seemed to infect the whole ranch with an over-sensitiveness. It was the strain of uncertainty and the apprehension of expectancy that were known to be the cause of Pa's transformation. As he spoke his tone denoted peevishness in addition to an impatience to know the worst.

"Well, Tom, what's on yuhr mind?"

"Nothin' much but my hat," he drawled. Now that the issue was at hand he felt nothing but regret and an undeniable reluctance to break the news. After a few seconds of hesitation and an appealing look at Jerry Milford, Bailey's companion, he said somewhat ruefully, "Joe Delaney rode through a spell back—an' them Morgans of his wasn't lookin' so pert an' slick as when he started out." There, it was out. Tommy heaved a sigh of relief and braced himself for the flow of strong language he knew must surely follow.

But Worthington was due for a surprise.

Instead of the usual outburst, Bailey demanded quietly, "Where was Joe headin' for passin' through here?"

"Said he'd bought th' ol' Day Ranch. Goin' tuh quit jinglin' wild horses an' settle down to a quiet life of a ranchman. Said his place up on Wild Horse was for sale. Claims he's quittin' th' wild-horse game for good. Guess Highlander give him too much run for his money."

Bailey merely snorted at this intelligence and spurred his horse on toward the corral: Tommy's mouth gaped open as he stared after his boss. Finally deciding there was something deeper here than appeared on the surface, he whirled upon Milford for an explanation.

Jerry chuckled at the other's looks of dazed mystification. "Yuh ain't tellin' us no news," he grinned. "We heard all about it over in Humboldt." With which unsatisfactory explanation, he also headed his horse toward the corral.

"Hold on," growled Tommy grasping Milford's horse by the bit. "Yuh ain't goin' tuh pull yuhr freight till yuh spill a little more information."

"Why, ain't I told yuh all there is tuh tell? What we heerd in Humboldt sort of prepared th' ol' man for yuhr bad news." Milford's tone as well as his grin were a direct denial to his words.

"Yuh're a cheerful liar," accused Tommy heartily. "Come through," he pleaded. "Pa didn't register enough disappointment tuh suit the occasion."

"Oh, boy, didn't he, though!" Milford drew a long breath at the remembrance. "He fairly raved an' tore his hair, an' cussed —say, boy, I didn't know there was so many wicked cuss words in th' world. I sure learned some prize winners. If yuh'll give me them new buckin' reins yuh got th' other day I'll learn yuh some of 'em."

"Aw, ring off," snapped Tommy impatiently. "I don't give a damn about th' cuss words. I want tuh know why th' ol' man ain't ravin' now. What happened tuh change his music?"

"Yuh sure are a persistent cuss, ain't yuh?" Milford regarded Tommy mournfully. "Here you want tuh learn some little unimportant details in preference tuh some brand new cuss words. Yuh sure've gettin' childish in yuhr ol' age. Someone told me yuh'd soon be of age." Jerry gave a sigh of resignation. "Well, I reckon I'll have tuh humor yuh."

Worthington knew that Jerry was about to let flow some information that he, Milford, considered of far more importance than all the new cuss words ever invented. His manner too strongly belied his words. "Ever hear tell of Dick Dover?" Milford tried to make his query casual, but Tommy noted that the cigarette he was attempting to roll acted like it was troubled with a bad case of the ague.

Worthington contracted some of Milford's evident excitement. "One-time sheepherder, now bronc snapper an' top rider for the Eight Slash Eight; an' th' only buckaroo that ever forked Twostep an' rode him to a standstill. Did I ever hear of Dick Dover?" exclaimed Tommy with feeling. "Did I ever hear of th' Rocker D?"

"Yuh forget the most important part, though," drawled Jerry significantly.

"What's that?" came the quick demand.

"Dover's buckskin string."

Then Milford explained in detail to Worthington some of Bailey's latest activities. Fearing probable failure on Delaney's part to capture Highlander, he had sent Pat Donovan out on a scouting trip to locate a substitute to continue the chase. Donovan, in his wanderings, had come in contact with some of the Eight Slash Eight riders. He made known his quest and through them learned of Dick Dover. Donovan, Milford said, requested to be kicked for not having thought of the fellow before. Dover had never been a wild-horse chaser, but he had all the qualifications; a thorough knowledge of horses and their habits, a daring tireless rider, and an expert with a rope. In addition to this was his wonderful string of buckskins who were fast winning themselves a reputation throughout the country for toughness, endurance and speed.

Upon hearing of Delaney's failure, Donovan hurried to Bailey with his information. Negotiations were immediately opened with Dover to take up the chase at once.

II

THE Eight Slash Eight represented a scene of lazy activity. Numerous cowboys were scattered about in the shade of the various buildings, mending and oiling their riding gear, a sure sign the spring round-up was at hand. Garry Mitchell, foreman of the Eight Slash Eight, stepped from the main ranch house and made his way slowly and thoughtfully toward the group of riders. A cloud of dust in the distance attracted his attention. He stopped to watch it intently for a few minutes.

"It's them," he muttered, as he continued his way. "An' they're sure burnin' th' dust. I reckon ol' Bailey is plumb anxious tuh size up his man."

The foreman's eyes roved over the riders until they came to rest on Dover, who was reclining in the doorway of the bunkhouse. He reached the scene just in time to hear Dover saying with gusto and pride, "Gents, I'm tellin' yuh them buckskins of mine c'n out-walk, out-run an' out-work any string of horses as ever struck this country. They'll rim-rock with th' best of 'em. That's a-barrin' none, yuh bet."

A moving object far below attracted his attention.

Dover's tone was as proud as it was boastful, and not without reason. A more wonderful string of horses with the combined toughness, endurance, speed and intelligence of Dover's private string of buckskins would be hard to find. They represented several years of Dick's young life in careful picking and training. The result caused the admiration and envy of all true lovers of horseflesh. But at the same time the Eight Slash Eight riders could not resist the temptation to tease the proud owner by belittling his buckskin posses-

sions whenever the opportunity offered.

"How 'bout that string o' Morgans of Delaney's?" reminded Dewey Scott, amid the struggles of needle and thread and a ripped glove. " 'Pears tuh me yuh're coverin' a smart bit of territory."

"Maybe th' territory Dick's country covers draws a line this side of Joe's blacks," suggested the foreman ironically.

"Don't kid yuhrself," retorted Dick, instantly taking up the challenge in the foreman's tone. "There ain't no limit tuh th' territory I got in mind. I ain't barrin' Delaney's blacks either, Mitchell, an' if yuh got any memory yuh'll recollect I've proved a number o' times them Morgans can't hold a candle along side of them bucks o' mine."

Mitchell rubbed his chin as though in deep contemplation. Then winking slyly behind his hand at the others he warned Dick soberly, "Better not make too much idle talk. What yuh say may be used against yuh. I got a hunch yuh're goin' tuh have a chance tuh make good some of yuhr boasts."

If there was a hidden meaning in the foreman's tone, Dover was in no humor to recognize it. His buckskins were being criticised. He unhesitatingly took up their defense. "I'm ready tuh put my bucks up against Delaney's blacks any time, any place, an' under any conditions," he asserted boldly. "Why, didn't I beat his Black Beauty on Buck in th' novelty race last summer at th' Frontier Days? An' didn't Timbuck show his Fleetfoot a clean pair o' heels in th' stake race? An'—"

"I don't reckon Timbuck c'n claim all th' credit for winnin' that race," broke in the foreman dryly. "There's a trick tuh every trade, an' more depends on th' rider than th' hoss in a stake race. Dick won that race by a trick."

Dick regarded his foreman in wide-eyed surprise, as did the others. Mitchell noted the looks and grinned. "Oh, no, Dick didn't pull nothin' crooked," he hastily assured. "He just held his horse back to th' tail end of th' herd so that when they reached th' turnin' point he was in th' clear tuh wheel, while th' rest had tuh sort o' scatter out tuh get elbow room."

Dick brushed the charge aside as though unworthy of further consideration. "How about th' free-for-all? I reckon Timbuctoo show 'em all some class, didn't he? An' th' relay race; there was Big Buck, an' Blue Buck, an' Yellow Buck—won first in ever' heat. Was there any trick in that, Mister Foreman? Do yuh want any more proof them buckskins is in a class by themselves?"

During the conversation a big touring car pulled up to the ranch house unnoticed by all except the foreman. Three men hurriedly dismounted and approached the group of interested riders in time to overhear Dover's closing remarks. Mitchell withdrew from the others and greeted the newcomers with a formal nod. "There's yuhr man over there." As one of the newcomers started hastily forward, Mitchell grasped his arm. "Hold yuhr hosses a spell," he muttered softly, then whispered his hastily formed plan in the other's ear.

The other frowned impatiently. "All right, Mitchell," he finally agreed, but with evident bad grace. "But hurry up an' get th' ball rollin'."

The newcomers received only a cursory glance and a curt nod of recognition. There were none but what recognized the familiar squat form of Bailey, the owner of the famed Thunderbolt. A few nodded a greeting to their recent acquaintance, Pat Donovan. Jerry Milford was more or less of a stranger to them. If they recognized anything unusual in the air they gave no hint. They continued their conversation in the same light-hearted, jocular vein.

"How 'bout Buckaroo an' that Texas long-horn yuh tried tuh bulldog?" demanded Reddy Jones with a malicious grin. "Ut 'pears tuh me that hoss jumped about ten feet aside wampus when one Dick Dover made a spectorious dive for said steer's horns, an' plowed a furrow halfway across th' racetrack with his nose." The reminder of *this* performance caused a roar from all except Dover, who put in hastily:

"That was plumb foolish of me—an' all my own fault. Buckaroo was too young and inexperienced."

"How 'bout th' time yuh rode Baby Buck in th' hat race over to th' Humboldt Fourth-o'-July celebration? Talk about yuhr sure-footed hosses, Baby sure showed his class

that day when he went a sprawlin' with yuh," was Reddy's second exasperating reminder.

" 'Most any horse is liable tuh pick up a hole now an' then," defended Dick quickly. "An' I'll tell th' world they were numerous 'round that burg."

"Is that th' time Frosty Dillon cut th' willow tuh twist him out?" chuckled Scott, referring to Baby Buck's mishap. "Th' Baby sure come near losin' himself that trip."

Dick joined in the merriment following Scott's remark, though the attempt was only half-hearted. For Dover, easy-going and good natured under most circumstances, was extremely sensitive to any disrespectful remarks concerning his pets. As their mirth somewhat subsided, Dick reminded somewhat warmly, "Yuh're mighty good recallin' some of my ponies' mishaps, but I reckon yuh forgot th' time Buckaroo saved yuh from gettin' gored by that Brahma steer."

Jones' face sobered. He recalled the scene all too vividly. "I reckon there's no credit comin' tuh Dick Dover for gettin' his loop on said steer," he reminded softly.

"Not as much as tuh Buckaroo, who I was just breakin', an' he laid on that rope like an ol' head," Dick instantly retorted. "An' I reckon yuh forgot th' time you an' Scott let that bunch o' wild broom-tails get away from yuh over on Spanish Creek, an' me an' th' Baby had tuh haze 'em in for you fellers just tuh show yuh how 'twas done." Dover grinned, again in a happy humor. Jones' sudden silence admitted his defeat.

Bailey gave the grinning foreman an impatient poke in the ribs, growling, "Make yuhr little spiel an' let's get goin'."

Mitchell stepped toward Dover, dragging Bailey with him. "Dick," he said in a loud tone, so that all about them might hear, "I warned yuh a while ago that what yuh said might be used against yuh. Yuh wouldn't listen tuh my advice. Now yuh got tuh live up tuh yuhr boasts or crawfish. This is Bill Bailey of th' Rocker D. He's heard of yuhr claim an' calls yuhr bluff. Yuh said yuh'd stake your buckskins against Delaney's blacks at any time and under any conditions. I reckon that time has arrived if yuh got th' nerve an' sufficient confidence in them buckskins tur risk th' reputation yuh've given them. Th' conditions an' circumstances I leave tuh Mr. Bailey tuh enlighten yuh on." Mitchell bowed low and stepped back, a mocking grin upon his lips.

Bailey broached the subject bluntly. "Dover, if yuh think them buckskins of yuhrs is better'n Delaney's blacks I'm goin' tuh give yuh a chance tuh prove ut. Delaney went out after my Highlander horse but failed tuh get him. My own men failed tuh get him. Everybody that's tried has failed tuh get him. Delaney came th' nearest to gettin' him of anyone. Them blacks of his are th' best in th' country—unless it's yuhr buckskin string. Prove it to me. Bring Highlander to th' Rocker D an' I'll admit to th' world they are. I'll give each one a gold medal. I'll give yuh a thousand dollars for th' time yuhr'e out—whether it's a day or a year—if yuh deliver Highlander. What do yuh say?"

Dover's hesitation came through amazement. As soon as he could regain his speech he demanded, "Who an' what is Highlander that yuh should offer such a price for his capture—an' where is he?"

Bailey answered the last question first. "He's somewhere in th' Honey Combs. Highlander is th' offspring of Flaxy, whose mother was a wild mustang an' originated from a band that roamed these same badlands. Thunderbolt is his sire, an' I guess I don't need tuh tell yuh nothin' about *his* reputation. *Why* I am willin' tuh pay such a price for his capture, all you men that're makin' a practice of ridin' in these buckin' contests will learn in th' future. I got a hunch he's agoin' tuh make one of th' hardest buckin' hosses any of yuh ever tried tuh fork."

"His description?" requested Dover curtly. Already his mind was made up. His eyes glowed with anticipation of the coming chase. Long had the desire lain deep in the heart of Dover to become a pursuer of wild horses. Now that the chance was as hand he could scarcely conceal his desire to be off.

Bailey sighed with relief. Quick to size up a man as he was a horse, he recognized capabilities in Dover that filled him with renewed hope. He knew that brains would play a bigger part in Highlander's capture than horse flesh. But he did not tell Dover

this. He knew the young fellow was totally wrapped up in his string of buckskins and had no desire to cast any reflection on them in the part they would probably play.

Bailey grasped Dover warmly by the hand. "I believe you will get him, Dover," he asserted quietly. "As for his description, yuh can't fail tuh recognize him. Those that have seen him at a distance claim he's a deep chestnut sorrel. But Delaney actually got his rope on him an' threw him. He claims th' horse is black on th' outside hair an' that th' underlyin' hair is a shade lighter than chestnut an' a shade darker than red. When th' sun shines on him I reckon that's what give th' chestnut sorrel effect. An' they say he is almost th' counterpart of Thunderbolt in build, except smaller, an' not quite so bony. He runs alone an' keeps mostly tuh th' high points. That's how come they tuh call him Highlander."

III

THIS was Dover's first view of the interior of the Honey Combs, and the sight reminded him of his first glimpse of the Grand Canyon, comparable if on a much smaller scale. Vari-colored cliffs—black, red, yellow, white — towered toward the skies and fell away in sharp, seemingly unscalable slopes; slopes that were tinted with the green of shrub cedar and the gray of sage and greasewood. He gazed long upon that maze of canyons that were brought out clearly from his point of vantage on Black Thunder peak, canyons that criss-crossed and zig-zagged until they met the main canyon wherein flowed the turbulent Humboldt River. It was a sight to bewilder the eyes and awe the soul, making one realize how really small and insignificant he really was.

And somewhere in this wilderness, this wild fastness that was uninhabited by any humans, roamed Highlander, the offspring of Flaxy, the untamable, and Thunderbolt, the man-killing stallion; for whose capture his owner offered a fabulous reward. Dover gazed out over his desolate surroundings through somber eyes, half regretting the hasty impulse that had led him into what now appeared a hopeless task. How could he ever locate Highlander in such a bewildering maze of badlands? He decided the task before him was not to be the simple matter his assurance to the Eight Slash Eight riders had indicated.

Three days before he had left the Eight Slash Eight, as enthusiastic a young rider as one could wish to see. But now the great silence took hold of him, oppressed and awed him. He yearned to be back at the Eight Slash Eight. The appeal of the chase had suddenly lost its attraction for him. He felt only a great loneliness, a desire for conversation with his fellow men.

Far down in the valley below, formed by Black Thunder Peak and the towering crags of Wild Horse Canyon, rested Dover's permanent camp. It was conspicuous, or rather invisible, by its very scarcity of equipment. There were his buckskin horses that blended well with their surroundings of yellow sandstone outcroppings. The balance of his outfit consisted of his small bedroll and the two panniers that carried his necessary cooking utensils and grub.

Dover had chosen this point as the base of his activities because he had been informed Highlander had been seen often in the vicinity of Black Thunder Peak.

In his two weeks of riding Dover had viewed neither human face or habitation. He was homesick, lonesome and discouraged. The life of a wild-horse wrangler would never again appeal to him. This he swore with violent feeling. Used to companionship all his life, he felt the solitude to a much greater degree. Only dogged determination and a desire to make good his boasts with his buckskins, kept him at his task.

One fleeting glimpse he had caught of his quarry. Dover judged the horse not to be over two miles away, yet it took him ten hours of steady riding to reach the point. There were deep-cut canyons and unsurmountable peaks to circle. Stars were already twinkling when he finally reached his destination.

That night Dover spent in the open without food or bed. As soon as he picketed his horse on a well-grassed knoll, he flung himself down under the shelter of a shelving rock, his saddle for a pillow, the sweat-

soaked saddle blanket his scant covering.

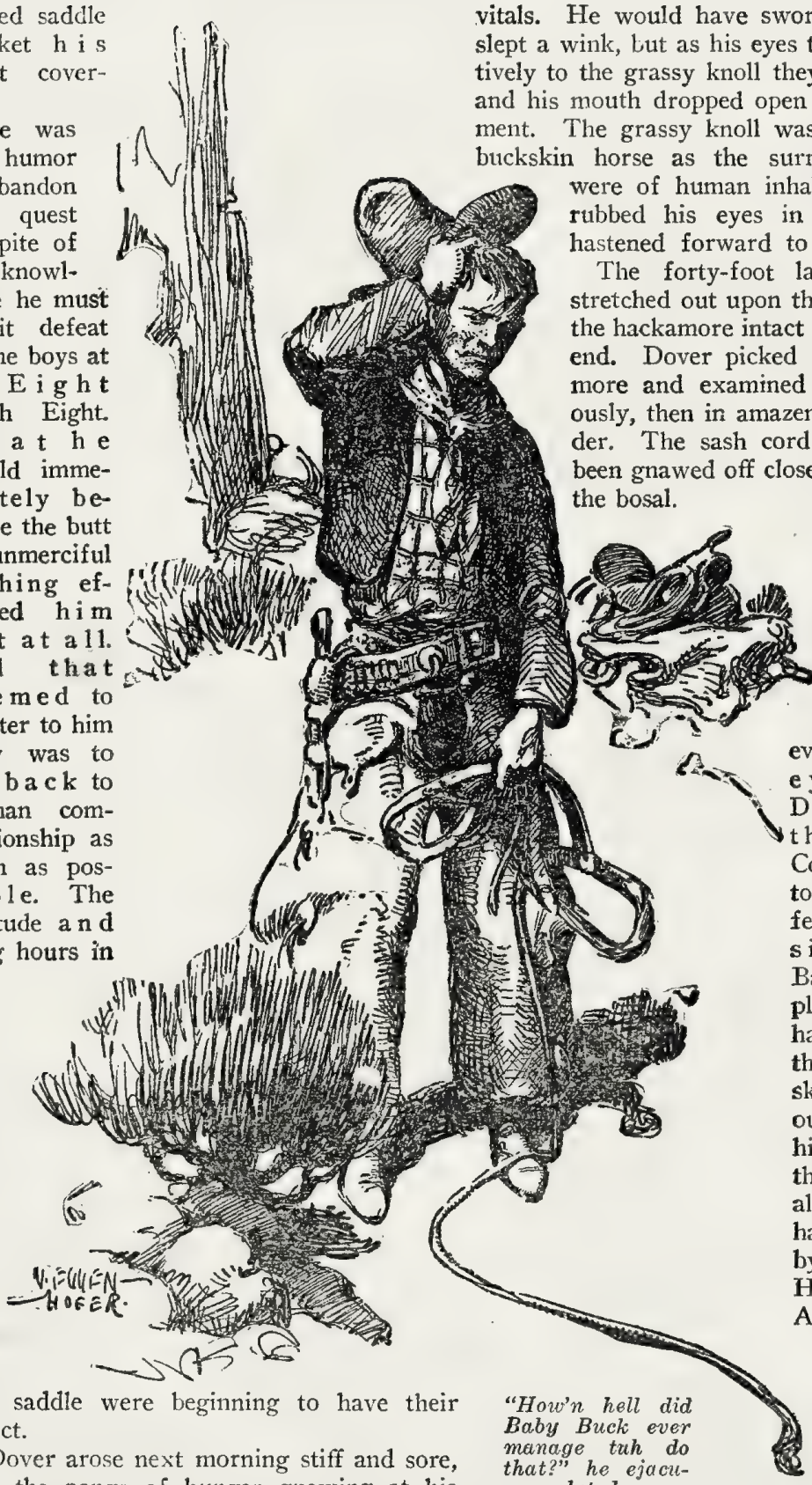
He was in a humor to abandon his quest in spite of the knowledge he must admit defeat to the boys at the Eight Slash Eight. That he would immediately become the butt of unmerciful joshing effected him not at all. All that seemed to matter to him now was to get back to human companionship as soon as possible. The solitude and long hours in the saddle were beginning to have their effect.

Dover arose next morning stiff and sore, and the pangs of hunger gnawing at his vitals. He would have sworn he had not slept a wink, but as his eyes turned instinctively to the grassy knoll they opened wide and his mouth dropped open in his amazement. The grassy knoll was as empty of buckskin horse as the surrounding hills were of human inhabitants. Dick rubbed his eyes in disbelief and hastened forward to investigate.

The forty-foot lariat still lay stretched out upon the ground with the hackamore intact upon the other end. Dover picked up the hackamore and examined it, first curiously, then in amazement and wonder. The sash cord theodore had been gnawed off close to the loop at the bosal.

"How'n hell did Baby Buck ever manage tuh do that?" he ejaculated, scarcely able to believe the evidence of his eyes. Then Dover grew thoughtful. Common sense told him this feat was impossible for the Baby to accomplish. This cord had been under the little buckskin's jaw and out of reach of his teeth. But the rope showed all evidences of having been cut by sharp teeth. How? Why? And by whom?

Dover's eyes wandered around the knoll for an answer to his puzzlement.



"How'n hell did Baby Buck ever manage tuh do that?" he ejaculated.

The grass was trampled in a way that caused him further wonderment. The first explanation that came to him was that a bunch of the wild hill mustangs had paid his mount a visit during the night, had gnawed the rope from around the little buckskin's neck, and inveigled him off with them. Further investigation disproved this theory, though. Dover had no trouble in distinguishing his own mount's small tracks in the moist turf and could make out but one other set of tracks.

Dover puzzled over the situation for some time when a startled exclamation escaped him. "Highlander!" he cried. "That damned outlaw cut my little hoss loose an' took him with him!"

This seemed hard to believe in view of the information given Dover concerning Highlander's peculiarities. "He r u n s alone," Pa Bailey had informed him. "Never been seen with another horse nor known tuh associate with one."

A worried thought crinkled his brow into a worried frown. Highlander, he recalled, was the offspring of that man-killing beast, Thunderbolt. Was Highlander gifted with the same instincts? Dover's hand clinched until the knuckles showed white, his eyes grew as black as the cliffs that towered above him; his lips drew back in a half snarl as he grated hoarsely, "If that offspring of a hellion so much as harms a hair of my Baby, I'll hunt him down if it takes me a year—or ten!"

But his mind was partially relieved on that score when further investigation showed no signs of a struggle. Dover managed to trace the tracks where they hit a dim trail that ran off toward the northeast. He exclaimed aloud as he reached a sandy stretch of ground where the tracks showed up plainly in complete outline. But what amazed and relieved him was the evidence of the smaller tracks showing up plainly on top of the larger ones. "Why th' little cuss is followin' that dang outlaw!" he muttered excitedly. Following the trail further he discovered where the larger tracks turned back and faced his camp. What Dover read in the tracks from then on caused his eyes to shine and a grin to crinkle his face. "Th' darn lovin' little cuss," he chuckled. "Shoot me for a hoss thief, if he ain't gone an' made friends with that Highlander hoss, an' they was rompin' along like two playful colts. How'd Bailey get that stuff Highlander don't pick up with no other hoss?" Dick smacked his lips and slapped his chapped leg in his enthusiasm. "He sure didn't take my little hoss intuh consideration. That Baby is th' friendliest little cuss that a buckskin hide ever covered—simply can't be resisted. Just see now how he made friends right off with this Highlander—th' lone wolf hoss!"

The great silent places breed the habit in man to speak his thoughts aloud. Dick now held as lively a conversation with himself as if he had been talking about the incident to a number of his brother riders.

He at last reached the point where the dim trail wound its tortuous way down the side of the almost perpendicular cliff. Dick regarded the precarious descent with prideful eyes. "If that outlaw figgered on stumpin' th' Baby in goin' down there he sure got fooled a plenty. Ol' Cliff Dweller, yuh'll find that little hoss 'll foller wherever yuh've a mind tuh lead."

A moving object far below attracted his attention. He watched it intently for several minutes, but could not distinguish in the early canyon dawn what it might be. "I'll bet it's them, though," he muttered excitedly, as he hurried back to his saddle to procure the fieldglasses.

As the objects were thus brought up closer Dick had no trouble establishing their identity. Yes, it was Highlander in the lead. Dover had no trouble recognizing his magnificent beauty even at this great distance. Following close upon his heels was the recreant Baby Buck, greatly resembling the other's colt by their difference in size. Dover watched them until they disappeared into a small grove of quaking aspens. He continued to watch for sometime after the two disappeared. Finally he arose, excitement and sudden hope replacing his discouragement of a short time before. With a hand that trembled slightly he again raised the glasses to his eyes a moment longer. With growing excitement he sheathed the glasses and started back to where he spent the night.

"It c'n be done," he muttered. "That's Highlander's hidin'place, I'll bet a plugged nickle. They both went in there an' never come out. It c'n be done," he repeated hopefully, as though trying to assure himself it really could. "There's a little neck of canyon runnin' up on th' south side of them quackies, an' comes out intuh that big canyon on th' west of Black Thunder Peak." It occurred to Dick to barricade the mouth of this smaller canyon, then ride up on the north side of the grove of quaking aspens. Highlander would naturally take to this little canyon. Once inside, Dover knew he had him as good as caught. He could force him down the canyon against the barricade, then build a second barricade above him, thereby having him penned in by a natural corral.

It did not take Dover long to form his plans, but he knew it would take him some little time to put them into action. First he must procure himself a saddle horse and something to eat. These things were not so far from him if he could find a way of climbing down and up these canyon walls that separated him from his camp. But if he was compelled to traverse the way he had come on horseback, it meant many long, weary miles of rough walking.

Dick balked at the idea. The thought of traveling that course on an empty stomach and in high-heeled boots appalled him. He cast it from him as unworthy of further consideration. Picking up the picket rope and adding to it the lariat from his saddle, he approached the cliff's edge that faced toward his camp.

I will not dwell upon Dover's trip back to camp. Let it suffice to say the descent he made was a precarious one. The climb up on the other side was just as difficult and hazardous. The sun had climbed well up into the heavens when he at last staggered into camp, faint from hunger, weary and sore from that arduous climb.

Swallowing his food in hasty, famished gulps, Dover hastened through his meal and prepared to move camp.

IV

AT noon the next day Dover drew rein on the narrow strip of meadowland that separated Wild Horse Creek from the towering cliff. A short quarter of a mile above was the little canyon he had spotted the day before.

Dismounting, Dover proceeded to turn his string of buckskins loose to graze. After satisfying his own hunger, he procured his camp ax and proceeded up the canyon to where the smaller one entered. The balance of the afternoon he spent fashioning the first barricade.

That night Dick slept soundly; probably the first sleep since his invasion of the Honey Combs. But the thought that Highlander would soon be his captive set his mind at rest, making him forget in the thrill of contemplation of the deed the solitude and lonesomeness of his surroundings.

Dick awoke at early dawn to a very disconcerting sight. Contentedly munching on the remains of his last night's meal was Baby Buck. Dover looked hastily about, hoping to see Highlander there also. But no such sight greeted his eyes.

At any other time and under any other conditions, Dover would have been delighted at this reappearance of Baby Buck. But his unexpected return signified one of two things: Highlander had discovered his presence and had forsaken this location, or else Baby Buck had tired of the outlaw's company and sought out his former companions.

Dick hoped it was the latter case. Highlander would then probably still be in the vicinity. He decided to try out his plans anyway.

Late in the afternoon Dover returned to camp utterly disheartened and weary of mind and body. No trace had he been able to find of Highlander. An investigation of the grove of quaking aspens verified his conclusions that it was the hiding place of the outlaw in time of danger. In its cool depths he discovered a natural meadow of luxuriant grass, and at its head a spring of crystal-clear water. Evidences showed that Highlander had sought this hiding spot often.

With hanging head and drooping shoulders, Dover rode into the clearing that held his present camp. Yellow Buck quickened his step and whinnied softly as he entered the clearing. Then he stopped short with a

violent snort. As a clatter of hoofs penetrated his senses, Dover looked up in time to see Highlander disappear into a fringe of scrub cedars.

"Doggone, he's been here visitin' th' Baby!" he exclaimed in sudden delight. "Yellow Buck, yuh darn little runt, we're goin' tuh get that feller yet!"

Dover spent a sleepless night among his blankets, his mind working out various plans for Highlander's capture. But each one was discarded as one he considered better occurred to him. Next morning, early, Dover caught up Baby Buck, removed some of the poles of his barricade, and turned the little buckskin loose inside the canyon, after which he replaced the poles. Then mounting some nearby crags, he concealed himself to await results.

This was not approved by Baby Buck. He did some frantic pawing and whinnying when he realized it was his master's intentions to leave him alone behind that enclosure of poles. The little fellow showed his displeasure of such treatment by tearing at the quaking aspen poles with his sharp teeth.

Baby Buck's behavior was as Dover desired. The more noise he made, the more certainty that Highlander would hear and come to investigate the other's predicament. So Dick climbed fast to reach a place of concealment before Highlander arrived and discovered his presence.

Baby Buck's clamor suddenly died down. Dover glanced down curious to learn the reason. "Surely," he thought, "Highlander ain't got here already." The Baby was evidently regarding his place of concealment, for his eyes were turned up in his direction and his ears cocked forward inquisitively. Then a soft whinny issued from his lips. "Th' darn little tike's reprovin' me for such treatment," chuckled Dover in amazement. But the grin was almost instantly replaced by a frown of puzzlement as his eyes unconsciously strayed to his other horses. They, too, were evidently staring with much interest at his hiding place.

Dover did not know what to make of it until a snort that seemed to issue directly beneath his feet startled him. Creeping on hands and knees to the edge of the shelving rock he peered below. There, not ten feet beneath him, stood the most wonderful sight he ever expected to witness!

Highlander, his well-shaped head held proudly erect, his well-shaped muscles rippling and vibrating in preparation for any move he might be called upon to make, gazed down upon the man-deserted camp. His glossy coat gleamed like molten chocolate in the early morning sunlight. Dick could even distinguish the flecks of blood shot in the wicked little eyes.

Backing carefully away, Dover reached for the hackamore and picket rope which he had brought with him after turning Baby Buck in the canyon behind the barricade. Its presence was an oversight on Dick's part, but now he thanked his lucky stars he had been absent-minded enough to carry it along. Just what he intended to do with it was not exactly clear in his own mind, but he was determined to make some attempt at the outlaw's capture this time before he made good his escape.

Dick worked fast, taking the forty-foot rope loose from the hackamore and fashioning a loop. Then fastening the other end to a husky scrub cedar, he crept again to the edge of the outcropping rock, the loop held ready in his right hand, the slack part of the rope coiled up in his left. Slowly, carefully, Dover slid the loop over the edge of the shelf. Highlander still gazed off toward the vacant camp as though not yet satisfied it was wholly deserted by danger.

It had been Dick's intention to drop the loop about the outlaw's neck. The loop had already left his hand when it flashed into his mind that Delaney had also got a loop about this horse's neck and he had broken it like so much twine. Quick as the thought Dover gave that part of the rope in his hand a flip outward, the loop actually grazing the outlaw's ears as it swept past his head.

Highlander gave a startled snort and whirled like a flash. He was so close to the wall of the cliff that he was compelled to whirl outward. The loop still falling, twined about his forefeet.

Dover leaped back and braced himself for the shock. The same instant the rope snapped taut, Dick's feet were hurtled from under him, his body was shot through the

air as from a catapult, and he had the sensation of falling through space.

Dick lit with a soft thud upon the body of the struggling horse, and afterward asserted he would just as soon have landed upon the top of an erupting volcano. All that kept him from continuing his terrestrial flight was that his wildly clutching hands got themselves entangled in the horse's heavy mane.

The fall so shocked Dick that all he could do was lay and gasp as he clung desperately to the writhing thing beneath him, and stare with dazed eyes at the blue sky above. But the horse's violent struggles soon placed Dover in such a position that he must move or get his brains dashed out by the threshing hoofs.

When Dover did move, he moved lively, nor did he stop until he got back from his camp with a generous supply of ropes. Ten minutes later he had Highlander trussed up as helpless as a new born babe.

Dick walked back to the cliff and sat down, regarding his handiwork with satisfaction. To say that he was elated would be putting it too mildly.

Dover regarded the horse long and steadily, his lips twitching in a manner that plainly told he wanted to say something but could not find the words to rightly express himself. He stared so long that the horse became invisible, his eyes were viewing other scenes. They grew dreamy and contemplative.

"Gold medals for each of my bucks an' a cold thousand for me," he murmured with a vacant smile. "Th' bucks 'll be heroes an' I c'n take a vacation. I sure been hankerin' tuh take a trip tuh California."

The light of reason returned and Dover regarded his captive with a happy grin. "Boy," he chuckled, "next tuh them gold medals an' that thousand bucks an' that trip tuh California, I'd sure like tuh see th' buckaroo that tries tuh top yuh!"

RUSTLERS' TRICKS

By Carl F. Happel

EVERY trade has its own little tricks, and the business of cattle rustling included numerous little devices calculated to deceive those to whom the stock legally belonged. It was the rustler's aim in life to alter another brand with his running-iron so that it resembled his own particular stamp and label. Thus, he would change the letter C to a zero or the letter O, while the letter I he found it possible to make into one of at least twelve other letters. And in the case of figures, for example, 3 could be so tampered with as to produce an 8 or a B.

But when the practice of carrying a running-iron on the open range was looked upon with suspicion, the rustler took to broken horseshoes or the side-bars of riding bits. These substitutes were not likely to attract notice and were easily carried. However, they proved difficult to handle when heated, and the "brand artist" next made use of baling wire and later even telegraph wire. This could be folded and hidden in the pocket, was very light and, most important of all, could be twisted into a number of set brands.

The older a brand looked the less it would seem that someone had altered it. For this reason the rustler often put a wet blanket or wet buckskin next to the animal's side when he applied his iron or wire. The half-dull effect would resemble a fairly old mark. And just the other way around, freshly made brands were what the cow thief most meddled with, since these could be most easily done over. Cattlemen lost their greatest amount of stock just shortly after the round up, when their trade-marks were burned on and ownership thus declared.

MORE ACTION

By
Ray Humphreys

Like as not it would have been Plug's last snapshot — the snake doin' the entire snappin'.

Some unthinking person gave "Plug" Ward a camera an' Plug set out to get action pictures. And the pictures weren't all the action Plug got — not by a long shot. The trouble with Plug was he was so dog-goned polite!

RED and I, sitting in the shade in front of the postoffice at Conifer, watched an awkward cowhand apologizing to Sheriff Dickison for bumping into him.

"There's an object lesson, Red," says I, "a man what's perlite don't get in no trouble—that clumsy duffer down thar is apologizing' an' he's goin' to git by without no trouble, even ef he didn't look whar he was a-walkin'—that's a good thing to remember, Red!"

Red snorted contemptuously.

"Tell that to some dude come out to show us how they ride in Central Park," shoots back Red. "Perliteness is as liable to git a bird in trouble as lack o' it is—lookit 'Plug' Ward, f' instance!"

"Where?" says I, glancing around.

"Oh," says Red, "he ain't here; he lives back up near Twin Lakes; I meant lookit what happened to him — perliteness! I should grunt—perliteness!"

I passed him a match.

"Thanks," says Red, lighting up the pill he had so laboriously rolled, "you take 'Plug' Ward, there was as perlite a feller as ever said 'Yes Marm' to a lady, an' yet look what happened to pore Plug. I tell yuh, Mac, 'twas a outrage, that's all I gotta say as to that."

"Plug," went on Red, puffing contentedly, "was as good a puncher as ever did 'light in these parts, bar none; he was a slick tophand, he was, an' was gettin' by swell, when all of a sudden a aunt o' his'n, back in Burlington, Ioway, takes the notion into her noodle to send pore Plug a camera f'r a birthday present, with films to go in it!

"Huh! They was a little red book come alongside o' that camera, tellin' how he should take the picters, an' explainin' that the great photy-graphers all over the world got great by takin' action picters—action, that was the word—more action—and Plug, who was a dern persevering lad oncet he got started, made up his mind f'r more action!

"Bein' as we was then about sixty mile from a railroad, Plug had to develop his own picters, an' th' book said, along with its advice f'r more action, that they should be a dark room to develop these here picters—an' gee, there weren't no dark room anywheres around the Twin Lake rancho,

so f'r as we could see, so Plug he takes it into his head to dig out a dark room f'r hisself in the claybank over the dry creek.

"Boys," says he, "when I gets the hang o' this machine derned ef I don't take all yer picters—an' they won't cost you a red penny, neither! Just have patience, please—I got to 'speriment with this doohickey fust!"

"Perlite? Say! An' after he got purty well dug into that claybank, an' readin' out of the red book about 'more action', derned ef that claybank didn't cave in on him an' nigh smother him, camera an' all, afore us fellers could get organized an' dig him out. More action, I should say yes! He got more action around them diggings in the next fifteen minutes as any chipmunk on Cherry Creek ever seen before; we drug him out, huggin' his precious camera, an' almost choked with sand and gravel, but he grinned and mumbled—

"'Thanks, boys; don't mind me a-tall—ain't nuthin'—don't mention it—pleasure's all mine!'

"Action? Say! You should oughter seen th' action thar was around the rancho when Old Sing Hop Lee discovers that two o' his pet skillets have strayed off and come to grief with acid in Plug's developin' room! Sing, he just about knifes Plug, but Plug is takin' it all nice, an' every time Sing turns loose a Chinese oath on him, Plug bows and says—

"'Correct, no doubt! I believe it! It's unquestionably true! Right yer are! Don't mind me—go right ahead!'

"He got action tryin' to take a picter of a rattlesnake, an' ef Poss Putson hadn't shot th' thing, like as not it would have been Plug's last snapshot, with the snake doin' the entire snappin'. He was out after more action all th' time, Plug was, an' he wasn't satisfied to take a picter of anything that wasn't tearing along at a mile er minnit! Th' steers around th' place was entirely too slow f'r Plug, so he gets Bowlegs Hinkle to chase a brindle one f'r him while he runs after them snappin' picters as fast as he can snap. He got purty good results at that f'r a amateur—six exposures, which included one picture of a flyin' hat, another of one horn, coming towards him, outta th' margin o' the picter; another of a end of a steer's tail; a picter of a cloud o' dust, an' a picter of Bowlegs Hinkle from th' hips down' an' one total blank. This was the best—it was a perfect blank; Bowlegs didn't like his portrait very well, but everybody knowed who it was the minnit they saw it.

"'Don't feel bad, Hinkey,' says Plug, perlite-like, 'I didn't get all the steer in the picter, either! I got more of you than I did the steer, so you should oughter worry! Yuh get that picter free anyhow f'r helping me!'

"Some of th' boys suggest as how Plug should cut all the pictures up, clippin' out the blank parts, an' paste all th' pieces together an' see what he got—a picter of the steer or a picter of Hinkle, but Plug kept right on pluggin'—an' that's no joke, neither—he shot at everything he seen in action with that camera, missin' scandalous, but gettin' practice in great big gobs; ef he'd had sneaked up on a broom or th' pump, or the corral fence, he could of got a swell group picter, but not him—he was after more action!

"An' then, 'long in August, he gets a brilliant idear.

"'Boys,' says he, 'I don't want to be no inconvenience, but I'm goin' to be gone from here on August 14th, the day o' the rodeo over to Slats, I'm expectin' to get me some snaps of them thar busters an' bulldoggers in action, savvy?'

"We nodded. Thar was nothin' to surprise us in the announcement; for weeks he'd been practicin' on focusin' distance, time, shutterin', an' the like, and we knowed that he had somethin' up his sleeve, an' here it was, th' Slats rodeo; 'course we tried to dissuade him, tellin' him what a sidewindin' bronc would do to him ef he stepped on him, an' what nice mincemeat he'd be ef a wild steer should tag him with his horns—but Plug was determined to go.

"'Thank you fer all the encouragement to stay home,' he said, 'but I really mustn't; I can't miss such a opportunity to get more action picters!'

"Plug left on schedule the morning of the rodeo, an' most of th' gang left alongside o' him, usin' him as a excuse to see

the show; ef anything should happen to Plug at the rodeo his friends must be thar to bring him back to consciousness, we tells th' boss, an' gets by with it. We hits Slats erbout noon, and it's then Plug lets us in on another secret o' his'n, sayin' as how he's carefully brung along all his extra print paper an' films, an' that he's gonna take a lotta snaps an' sell 'em to the crowd an' th' contestants right hot outten th' developer.

"'It's g o l d m i n e,' says Plug enthusiastic.

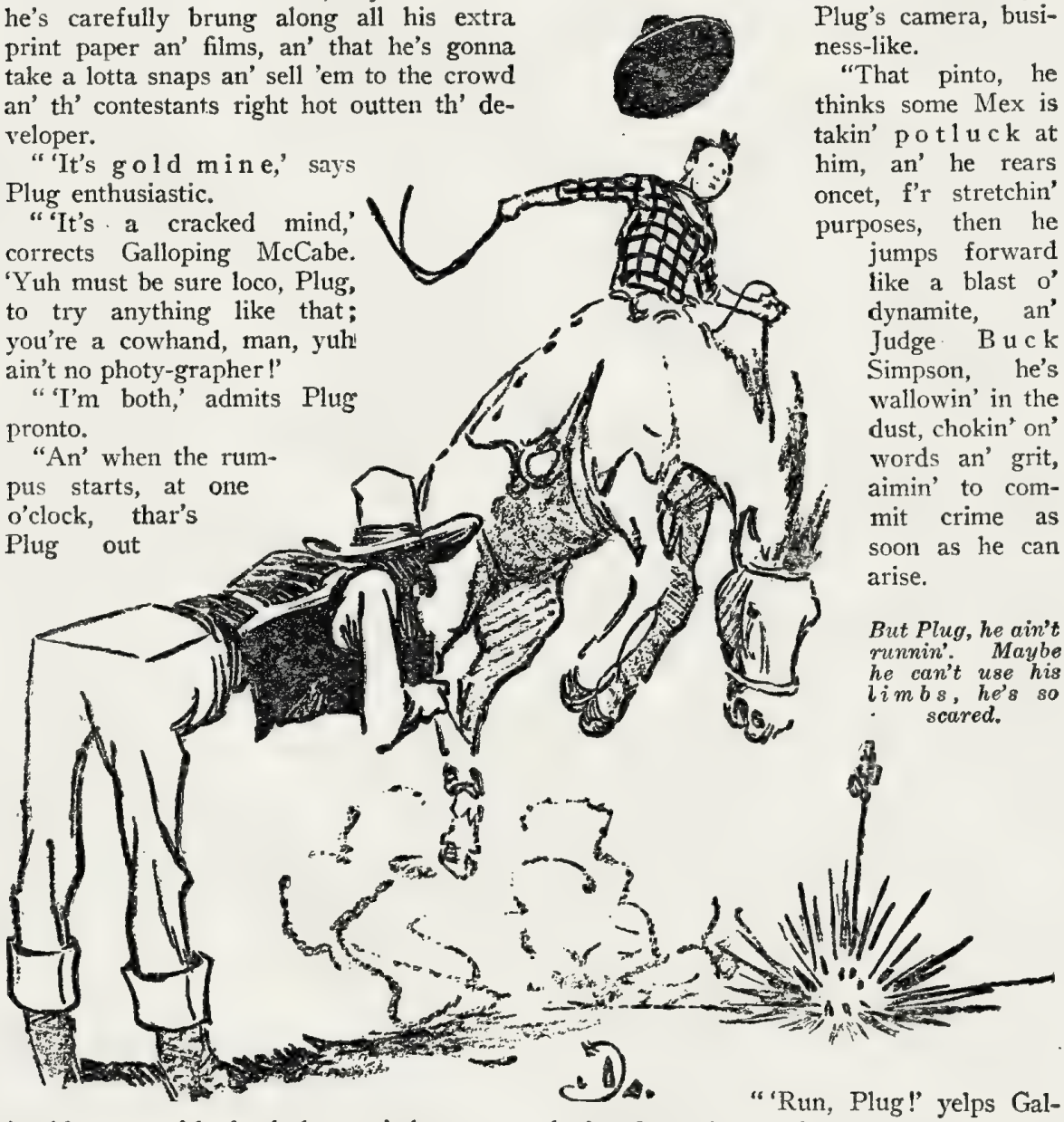
"'It's a cracked mind,' corrects Galloping McCabe. 'Yuh must be sure loco, Plug, to try anything like that; you're a cowhand, man, yuh ain't no photy-grapher!'

"'I'm both,' admits Plug pronto.

"An' when the rumpus starts, at one o'clock, thar's Plug out in th' arena with the judges an' the wranglers an' the wild critters, nervy as yuh please, with his camera all set an' ready. We boys as knowed him give him a cheer when he steps inter the arena, an' that made some folks in th' grandstand think we was 'toxicated, but we wasn't; we was worried, that's all. An' we soon saw we had heap cause to be worried, too; th' fust thing Plug does out thar is to sneak up pussyfoot on Buck Simpson, one o' th' field judges, just as Buck, bustin' with importance, is climbing warily onto a nervous pinto.

"'C l i c k!' s a y s Plug's camera, business-like.

"That pinto, he thinks some Mex is takin' p o t l u c k at him, an' he rears oncet, f'r stretchin' purposes, then he jumps forward like a blast o' dynamite, an' Judge B u c k Simpson, he's wallowin' in the dust, chokin' on' words an' grit, aimin' to commit crime as soon as he can arise.



But Plug, he ain't runnin'. Maybe he can't use his l i m b s, he's so scared.

"'Run, Plug!' yelps Galloping from the stand.

"But Plug, he ain't runnin'. Mebbe he can't use his limbs, he's so scared. He just stands and gulps out somethin', an' Judge Buck he reads 'im th' riot act, an' ends up by orderin' him an' his camera outten the arena, but Plug appeals to the rodeo committee an' they reinstate him f'r the sum of five dollars cash money paid at once

which Plug does; now he's gotta sell a bunch o' picters to split even.

"Natural, when the buckin' starts, nobody pays much attention to Plug. He's to be seen, howsomever, sech as can see, through the dust, dodgin' hither an' thither an' stumblin' over his camera, an' gettin' outten th' way o' some rushin' bronc just by the skin o' his teeth; the kids an' wimmen in the stands, as ain't up much on ridin' technique, they takes to watchin' him entire, an' they cheers every time he makes a death-defyin' rush at a bronc with his camera; two or three greasers think Plug is doin' a bullfightin' stunt an' they cheers him to the echo, all of which is mighty nice except it was like sending flowers to a funeral, pore Plug was too busy and too hot to know the applause was fer him.

"Each time they slips a nasty hoss outten th' chute, with a puncher stickin' to his heavin' back like a cork bobbin' on a angry sea, Plug slides up close as he dares and clicks the performance; he was shootin' fast, an', as we fellers decided from knowin' him, he was probably shootin' wild, wide an' handsome, but he must have his fun. Oncet we saw him creep up on a sunfishin', stiff-legged cayuse as was doin' its best to unseat Curly McFee, an' squat not ten feet off from that hunk o' mean hossflesh, an' click until he ran outten films an' had to put in a new roll.

"For two hours he did that, runnin' around the arena like a locoed man, snappin' an' clickin' that camera, with all th' judges an' riders cussin' him together an' trying their best to ride him down as he had become a nuisance, givin' everybody the jimjams by his utter disregard o' danger; you'd think he'd been disappointed in love an' was tryin' to kiss the world good-by; every time he jumped he just did get clear o' churning hoofs, an' the wimmenfolks in the stand was all cryin' to be took home afore he was kilt. Then, suddenly, afore anyone knowed what he was doin', he was climbin' th' arena fence; we wondered what was up, an' ef the committee had ordered him out again, but Galloping says no; that he was just quitting early so he could develop his stuff an' get it printed afore the show was over, an' be back peddlin' his picters afore th' crowd an' contestants got away from the arena. After Plug left the arena th' show perked up considerable, everything got serious, an' nobody thinks o' Plug again until the wild mule race. The closing event on the program is announced, and with that announcement we sees old Plug climbin' back into the arena, a mittful of soggy prints in one hand.

"Th' judges are all drawed up in a little knot to one end o' th' arena, tryin' to get together on who won this an' who won that, but havin' most trouble with who won the buckin' contest; Plug, he worms right up amongst them, bowing an' scrapin' in his perlite way an' handin' to each judge a set of complimentary picters—showin' snapshots o' th' afternoon's buckin', ropin', an' bulldoggin', taken on the grounds by that great photy-grapher, Plug Ward hisself. Th' judges cast wary eyes over th' collection, wave pore Plug to one side an' goes inter executive session, comin' out purty pronto to announce that 'Big Hat' Holmes has won the buckin' champeenship an' that makes Curly McFee, who thought he had it cinched, set up on his haunches an' howl.

"While the wild mule race is on an' as Plug is sellin' his picters through the crowds, a dime a shot, Curly interviews the judges with his grievance an' is convinced that he ain't got no chance to get the buckin' honors; when he sees that further argument is useless, he starts lookin' fer Plug, announcin' he's in the market fer a photo o' hisself what Plug snapped that afternoon. He finds Plug right in front o' th' grandstand, an' he ask Plug to show him a sample o' that picter Plug took o' him on that mean bucker, an' Plug, smelling another dime, fishes it out proud an' hands it over to Curly, who takes a long squint, then smacks his lips loud-like.

"'You're a fine photy-grapher!' he remarks.

"'Thank you!' says Plug, bowing.

"'Will yuh hold my hat fer me?' asks Curly.

"'Sure will,' says Plug, perlitely.

"'An' my gun an' holster,' says Curly.

"'Certainly!' says Plug.

"With that Curly hands him his hat and his gun an' holster, all of which Plug holds

in one hand, while in the' other hand he's holdin' all his precious prints. When he gets both hands full Curly looks hard at him.

" 'Smile now!' he says.

"Whether Plug did or not we couldn't see; all we do see is a flash o' Curly's right fist as it sails through the air an' connects with a sickenin' thud with Plug's chin, Plug wobbling slightly just as Curly puts over his left, which is a haymaker, an' puts pore Plug to sleep entirely; 'bout that time Galloping an' Pete an' me is on our feet yelpin' fer the referee er somebody to interfere. The judges come tearin' over just as we gits down to Plug's side, an' while explanations are free an' gratis we learns that what happened was that the judges had erbout decided on givin' Curly McFee th' buckin' honors when Plug comes in with his picters an' one o' these picters shows Curly pullin' leather, the camera gettin' it when the judges couldn't see fer dust!"

Red stopped and sighed and shook his head.

"That's what a man gets fer bein' too perlite," he concluded dramatically, "ef pore old Plug, who give up photy-graphy right after that accident, hadn't been so derned perlite as to hold Curly's hat and gun and holster fer him, he wouldn't of been knocked cold as he was—no sirree, Mac, a feller can be too perlite, yuh take that from me!"

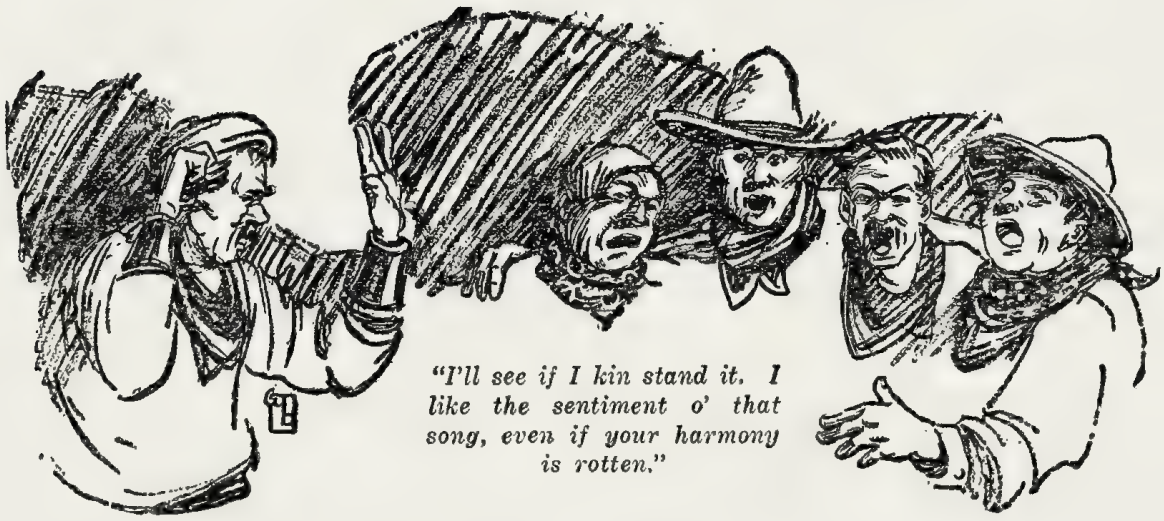
RIDE 'EM, COWBOY

By Ben A. Miller

"PARD—this old Cheyenne is smokin'
Like a 'het-up' runnin'-irn;
Yippi-yeeee! 'Them outlaws broken?'—
Yeah, they TRAINED 'em in a barn!
See that 'Blue'—'at's Coloradder,
See his nose-holes pant an' suck!
Blindfold's off!—Wow! Be a shadder!
Ride 'em Cowboy!—Let him buck!"

"There's th' 'Yaller Rose of Texas'—
(Fust she rises—then: HE rose!)
There's 'Red Pepper' and the nex' is
'Poco Tempo' (on yer nose!)
That's 'Mañana'—(means 'To-Morrow')—
There's 'One-Second': 'Pick-Me-Up.'
'HOT today?'—Wall that's yore sorrow—
Fan 'em Cowboy!—Let him buck!"

" 'LUCK' you Eastern Dudes are ravin'—
Ridin's WORK!—An' yet, it's fun.—
When yore fool, stiff neck yo're savin'
Yore success is: Work—well done!
Son, to TRY ain't wuth a cinco
If you aim to ride by LUCK—
Scrape you 'Siwash'—Rake 'at pinto!
Don't pull leather!—MAKE him buck!"



"I'll see if I kin stand it. I like the sentiment o' that song, even if your harmony is rotten."

HARMONY RANCH

By Paul Everman

Emmet Ryan was always grumbling about the noise his singin' cowboys made; but when the boys left him, the ranch was so gloomy and quiet, doggone, if he wouldn't like to hear SWEET ADELINE again.

"*GOOD-NIGHT, la-dees. . . You're gonna leave us now!*"

Singing this fervent song of thanksgiving, four cowboys filed into the Diamond L ranch house. Dusty, Bert, Moxie and Pete, they possessed an incurable habit of breaking forth into earnest, labored harmony. They were a quartette, ranging from the shrillest of high tenor to the most sepulchral of deep bass.

Emmet Ryan, thick-set and powerful, his bristly hair and whisker-stubble aged to a mixed hue most fitly described as a strawberry roan, shot up a malevolent glance at his warbling range-force.

"Sing away!" he barked above the harmony, jabbing his thumbs into his ears, with the practised, habitual air of a bedeviled martyr. "I'll see if I kin stand it. I like the sentiment o' that song, even if yer harmony is rotten!"

"*Mer-ri-lee they roll along—over the grassy plain!*" caroled the earnest quartette, thankfully.

It was the first day in September. The string of cabins between the main house and the creek were empty. For, early this morning, an auto stage had borne away the dozen-odd lady school-teachers who had been summer-boarders at the Diamond L. Lizzie Miller, whom Emmet had hired as cook during the tourist season, had gone back to her Cedar Hills homestead.

The Diamond L was a bachelor ranch once more. And so, the musical cowboys felt constrained to render their version of "Good-Night, Ladies"—a hymn of rejoicing, thanksgiving. Their season of dude-wrangling was ended. An honorable status was about to be restored. Again they would be cowhands who worked with cows.

It was pay-day, too, at the Diamond L. On a chair before Emmet Ryan were stacked four piles of bills and silver. Emmet always paid in cash. Over in the corner of the big room sat a small black safe, the door angling open. A series of bank-failures in this Northwest country had disturbed Emmet; whereupon he had bought the safe and become his own banker. Independently, he declared that he didn't feel the need of doing business with banks, anyhow. And it was true that, in spite of drouths and low stock-prices, Emmet managed his rich, well-watered range with such provident efficiency that he had never been forced to seek a single loan from the men of finance. To be sure, he grumbled about hard times. But, with Emmet, grumbling and fault-finding were chronic.

"*Good-night, ladees . . . You're gonna*

leave us now!" ended the quartette with a vengeance.

Each member grabbed up his wages from the chair. Then, of a sudden, they looked up, inquiringly. In the doorway stood a newcomer, a stranger. He was a pale, limber fellow with a long, scrawny neck and bulging gray eyes. A miniature golden horseshoe, inset with brilliants, was anchored in his crimson necktie.

"A cowboy quartette!" he ejaculated mildly, in surprise, slipping his eyes about the room. "Boys, that sounds good. Sing another one."

"No. It sounds rotten!" disputed Emmet Ryan, slamming shut the door of his safe and giving the knob a twirl. "And if they sing any more this morning, I'll shoot!"

The limber stranger laughed silently. "You're witty," he said to Emmet.

"I'm mad!" declared Emmet, planting his thick-set form firmly and glaring at the offending quartette. "And my ears feel sorry for myself, whenever *they* do their durn harmonizin'."

The stranger laughed again and said that, if he knew anything about it, the boys were pretty good. And a cowboy quartette was a novelty.

"My name's Jack Vellacott," he told Emmet. "I'm taking a rest from my regular work, which is on the vaudeville circuits. Over at High Range they told me you had what they called a dude ranch, and that you'd board me during my vacation."

"Two dollars a day—private cabin and board," said Emmet Ryan, all business, as the other fished a thick roll of bills from his pocket. "I wasn't figgerin' on takin' any more boarders, this year," he complained. "But you kin stay, if you kin stand plain cookin'."

It was settled. Jack Vellacott's slim white hand extended to Emmet the price of a week's board and lodging. And then he turned to the silent quartette.

"Why can't we have a little more music?" he wanted to know, in a friendly way.

The quartette glanced at Emmet, who growled, "I'll try to stand one more. But make it short. Make it 'Sweet Adeline'."

Dusty, Bert, Moxie and Pete plunged into harmony. They sang earnestly, with persistence and determination. "Sweet Adeline" rose, wavered, sank, revived, and then died on a smashing chord.

Jack Vellacott's bulging eyes stared at the perspiring songsters.

"Why—you're good!" he breathed. "A darn sight better than some flops I've heard on the circuits!"

He grabbed Pete Donley's arm. "Boy, you're a *basso profundo!*"

"You're a liar!" bristled Pete, who was short and bow-legged.

"Sh!" soothed the newcomer. "What I mean is that you've got a deep bass voice that's a knockout. You sing underground, as it were—with a cellar pitch and a Big Bertha volume. I mean you're good!"

And then Jack Vellacott passed flowing compliments on the vocal qualities of Dusty, Moxie and Bert. A little practice, he declared, was all that was needed to give them the professional touch.

"Git to work!" commanded Emmet balefully, to his men. "You ain't song-birds. You're supposed to be cowhands—even if you don't half earn your wages." And he called after them: "Git Vellacott's hoss and put it up in the corral."

"I haven't any horse," said the pale, limber newcomer. "I walked."

"Walked?" echoed Emmet, who had a cowman's inherent horror of walking. "And it's ten miles from High Range!"

With this, Emmet locked the door of the room—which was at once private sleeping-quarters and strong-room—and his thick-set form plowed down to the first guest cabin.

"Make yourself to home," he said to Jack Vellacott, throwing open the door.

The Diamond L was a bachelor ranch once more. But Emmet was not yet ready to restore his men to the honorable status of cowhands who worked with cows. Instead, he set them to work laying up sod walls for a new implement shed. And there was grumbling a-plenty—from the men, who were keen to be in the saddle; and from Emmet himself, who called them loafers and found fault with their way of doing things.

As for Jack Vellacott, he made himself at home, prowling around here and there, and

sitting on the porch of the main house with Emmet—in short, living the contented life of one who had come from the busy vaudeville circuits to seek complete quiet and rest. As the cowboys put it, he was "easier wrangled than most dudes."

Sometimes, it was true, while on the front porch with Emmet, he would show signs of restlessness, as if this indolent life might become a bore.

At evening, the Diamond L men would gather eagerly at his cabin, and then harmony would break forth on the air. Jack Vellacott showed enthusiasm over the warblings of the earnest quartette. He undertook to teach the singers some new tunes.

On the porch of the main house, Emmet Ryan would sit alone, listening. Under Vellacott's tutelage, "Sweet Adeline" took on minor chords, with Dusty's shrill tenor quavering tenderly and Pete's robust bass subdued to a plaintive growl. The new tunes were attacked earnestly—with trials and retrials, breaking-downs and fresh starts, erratic openings, groping middles and desperate finals.

The quartette would keep on persistently till midnight. And, without fail, there was competition to the songs. Tied to the rear of the main house was a chain; the chain was attached to a dog-collar; the dog-collar surrounded the neck of a surly coyote which Dusty Sherman had captured in the hills. As the quartette sang, the coyote would pace back and forth, throw his nose to the heavens and howl. And after the singing ceased, the coyote would keep on howling till the glow of morning came.

On the porch of the main house, Emmet Ryan would sit alone, listening.

Emmet Ryan complained violently of sleepless nights. He blamed the quartette; he blamed the coyote. This dog-gone noise must stop! He threatened vengeance dire.

On the third night, he took his gun and plowed around the house. The coyote howled and snapped at him. He shot the coyote.

The next morning, Jack Vellacott asked Emmet with the curious air peculiar to tenderfeet: "I'd always supposed that cowboys didn't do anything but take care of steers. Don't you ever send your men out away from the ranch house—on round-ups and that sort of thing?"

Emmet grunted. "They'll finish that sod-house—if it takes 'em a month—afore I send 'em out to go in my beef stuff."

Vellacott's gray eyes bulged curiously out of his pale face. "I guess I'm just a tenderfoot," he laughed. "Ranch life is different from what I thought. I thought cowboys lassoed steers in the daytime, and that when night came they rode away to town or to spend the evening with their girls."

"You won't ketch 'em spendin' any even-in's away now—while you're here to teach 'em new songs," growled Emmet.

And it seemed as if Emmet were right about it. The nightly quartette rehearsal had become a habit, an institution, an event. The Diamond L boys were fond of their new director; grateful for his help and enthusiasm. The harmonious urge led them to his cabin each evening. Had he wished, he could hardly have escaped their earnest, half-apologetic demand for further instruction in the magic attainments of harmony.

And now they even sang as they worked. Did a block of salt-grass sod go up into the wall of the new shed, it was accompanied by a passionate rendition of "Sweet Adeline" or "Said the Monk to Chimpanzee." They sang all the time.

And Emmet growled and growled. Why didn't they shut up? But the songsters persisted, despite his growling. He imagined he detected a growing air of insubordination among them; a reckless ignoring of his mighty commands. Sometimes he would see them with their heads together, talking in secretive tones, throwing out their chests with eager sighs and casting toward Jack Vellacott glances which enshrined that pale gentleman as a saviour.

By now, Vellacott seemed to be tiring of his quiet vacation. He roamed about restlessly, and his bulging eyes, while seeming to take in everything, had a disgusted look. He frankly admitted that he was beginning to long for the bustling life of vaudeville.

In the evening, before the quartette rehearsal began, he would remove his coat and go through a series of stunts which he said were part of his vaudeville act. He did a juggling act with four bottles; gave a contortionist exhibition, bringing his feet up behind his head and balancing himself frog-like on his two hands; persuaded the men to tie him up tightly with a thirty-foot rope and then, after a few magic twists and wriggles of his limber body, freed himself, while the ropes fell slack at his feet. The cowboys would applaud vociferously, and from his easy chair on the porch Emmet Ryan would look down with interest.

On the fifth morning, Vellacott asked Emmet for the loan of a horse, and said he guessed he'd ride over to Piñon. When he returned, at dusk, the quartette surrounded him excitedly. Mysterious hurrahs split the air. And the rehearsal this evening had an inspired ring. "When You're Half Way Up, You're Neither Up Nor Down," sang the quartette with a gusto, under Jack Vellacott's guidance.

Next morning, at sunup, as Emmet Ryan stepped out on his porch, his blue eyes popped in astonishment. Before him stood his four cowboys. Each man was dressed in his Sunday best; each held the bridle of his individual mount; each had a packed war-bag tied behind his saddle. Jack Vellacott stood with them.

"We're quittin', Emmet," said Pete Durbin, in deep, husky tones.

Dusty, Moxie and Bert nodded affirmatively. "We're takin' up another line o' work," they said proudly. "We're going on the stage—in voddyvill."

"Eh—what?" exploded Emmet, blankly scratching the grayish-red stubble on his blocky chin.

The quartette explained. Jack Vellacott, an experienced man of vaudeville, had recognized the professional possibilities of their singing. Yesterday, from Piñon, he had telegraphed the Empire Circuit, by which he was employed, that he had discovered a quartette of cowboys, whose vocal ability he stood ready to sponsor. The Empire Company wired back, authorizing him to sign up the quartette and depart immediately with the members for Chicago,

where they would be routed on the circuit.

Each member of the quartette was to be paid one hundred dollars a week. They would be costumed in scarlet silk shirts, soft green chaps and fancy white sombreros. They would be billed as "The Cowboy Harmonizers."

And now they were going to Piñon, where Vellacott had arranged for them to give a practise performance at the Opera House to-night. To-morrow morning they would board the train for Chicago—and vaudeville.

"I'm afraid you don't appreciate the ability of these boys," observed pale, limber Jack Vellacott to Emmet. "They're good! Before the footlights, they'll be like Samson."

Emmet glowered. No words came.

"Samson brought down the house," explained Vellacott, with a chuckle.

Emmet tramped inside to his strong-room. With fumbling hands he counted out five stacks of money from the ample hoard within the small safe.

"Here's your wages," he growled, reappearing. "An' here's the money that's comin' to you from your advance board, Mister Vellacott. Now, git out, the whole durn pack of yuh!"

Jack Vellacott stepped forward. "We hope you hold no hard feelings, Mr. Ryan," he declared courteously. "I feel that you ought to have a fatherly interest in the vocal efforts of these boys. And we'd all appreciate your presence at the Piñon Opera House to-night to help give the quartette a hearty send-off on its first concert."

"No!"

"Uh—we're kinda sorry to leave yuh, Emmet," said the quartette, with much clearing of throats. "But we got our singin' opportunities to consider."

"You're a lazy bunch o' song-birds!" choked Emmet. "Git!"

They rode away. Jack Vellacott was mounted behind Dusty. They rode toward Piñon.

Emmet slammed down on the porch to watch a long day drag by. Recovery from this startling, unexpected blow was not rapid. His cowboys—been with him four years—renouncing saddle and range for the glitter of the vaudeville stage!

He blamed Jack Vellacott for bringing it all about. The cowboys had sure left him in a fix, deserting him this way. The sod-house was not yet finished, and he had meant to send them out into his beef stuff next week. Now he'd have to rustle for some new hands. He'd do that to-morrow. He was tired, somehow—didn't seem to have much get-up about him today.

Evening came, and Emmet still sat on his porch. He couldn't help noticing how quiet everything was—monotonous and lonesome-like.

Through the dusk, a small automobile came bucking over a hill and drew up at his door. Lem Temple, the sheriff from High Range, lumbered out, his gold teeth gleaming under his heavy gray mustache.

"Howdy, Emmet," he nodded. "I'm lookin' fer a young feller named Jack Beasley, who goes under a lot o' other names. A feller answerin' his description was in High Range five-six days ago, lookin' fer a rest-ranch. Somebody told him you might board him for a spell. I thought mebbe he was here, hidin' out."

"Jack—" grunted Emmet, and stopped. "Describe him," he said.

"Tall an' pale," said the sheriff. "Long white hands. Used to be an actor. He broke jail in Tingley, Wyoming, about two weeks ago. They call him the Handcuff King. Seem like they ain't a lock made he can't pick, ner a handcuff that'll hold him."

"Ah-hah," breathed Emmet. He straightened, and his eyes twinkled through the dusk toward the sheriff.

"Lem," said he, "you go to the Opry House at Piñon right pronto. You'll find your Handcuff King there with a bunch o' good-fer-nothin' cowhands that thinks they're singers. They're gonna give a concert to-night. . . No, I won't go along. I'll wait right here—fer my boys to come home and beg my fergiveness. I got a hunch that after you take the Handcuff King into custody they'll head fer the Diamond L 'stead o' Chicago. I don't want 'em to think I'm comin' after *them.* I want them to come to *me. Adios,* Lem."

The sheriff was gone; Emmet found himself thinking that maybe, after all, it would have been best for him to have gone along.

Maybe it would take more than the arrest of their new leader to deter the "Cowboy Harmonizers" from their theatrical ambitions. Maybe they would go on to Chicago anyhow, carrying out the arrangements Vellacott had made. Well, doggone it, he wasn't going to *beg* them to come back to his employ.

He thought about Jack Vellacott—or Beasley—or whatever his name was. A jail-bird! Funny how things turned out. He reckoned the lying son-of-a-gun had decided to quit whatever kind of devilment he'd been up to and go back to a law-abiding life on the stage. Maybe the boys' singing had kind of put into his head the idea of hiring out with a vaudeville company—maybe the same one he used to work for—and taking the boys with him. But it would be jail again, instead of the stage, for Jack Vellacott!

The stars had come out. The moon slid up over the trees that bordered the creek, and in its glow the corrals gleamed whitely. Emmet shivered. Never before had his ranch seemed lonesome like this.

About this time, last night, the quartette had been hitting it up down at the first guest cabin. Emmet almost imagined he could hear Dusty's high tenor quavering tenderly: *"At night, dear har-rut. . ."*

"Well," thought Emmet, wandering inside his strong-room and locking the door, "this is one night I'll get some sleep."

On his bed near the small safe, he slept fitfully. Every now and then he would throw his right arm up across his face, muttering, "Sweet—Adeline."

Suddenly he struggled into wakefulness. His restless arm had collided with flesh and bone. Something like a damp cloth brushed his face. In his nostrils was a soothing mysterious odor.

Emmet lunged up. His arms grabbed a limber, wriggling form.

"Ah-hah!" he roared, a minute later, lighting a match and peering down at the face of the panting captive whom he now roughly bestrode. "So it's you—Mister Vellacott."

It was ten o'clock, and at the far end of the Piñon Opera House stage four gloomy young men were gathered. They were the "Cowboy Harmonizers" quartette.

"It's Pete's fault," sighed Dusty, with a disconsolate glance toward the rows of empty seats below. "He insisted on tryin' to charge four-bits a head admission. If we'd made it free, like Jack wanted, we'd 'a' drawed a crowd and could 'a' give our concert.

"Where is Jack, anyways?" Pete wanted to know uneasily, for the fifth time. "Shorely it ain't took him all this time to arrange fer our railroad transportation to Chicago. He said he'd be back here in time to direct the last number on our program."

"Well, our program ain't even got as fur as the *first* number. But I reckon we better keep on waitin' here fer him," sighed Moxie.

They looked at one another. They sighed. And then they glanced up, with startled exclamations.

Tramping steps had sounded. Across the stage, Emmet Ryan's thick-set form came plowing. His right hand was pulling at a taut chain.

"Is there a sheriff in the audience?" he bellowed, facing the empty auditorium. Then, glimpsing the quartette, he inquired in puzzlement: "Eh—where *is* the audience?"

A new voice rose. "That you, Emmet Ryan?" Sheriff Lem Temple towered up from concealment behind a pile of canvas.

"By doggies, Emmet!" he ejaculated, with popping eyes. "Did *you* ketch him?"

Emmet Ryan tugged at his chain. The chain was attached to the dog-collar which had held captive Dusty Sherman's night-howling coyote. But now the collar surrounded the long, scrawny neck of—

"Jack Vellacott!" gasped the astounded quartette.

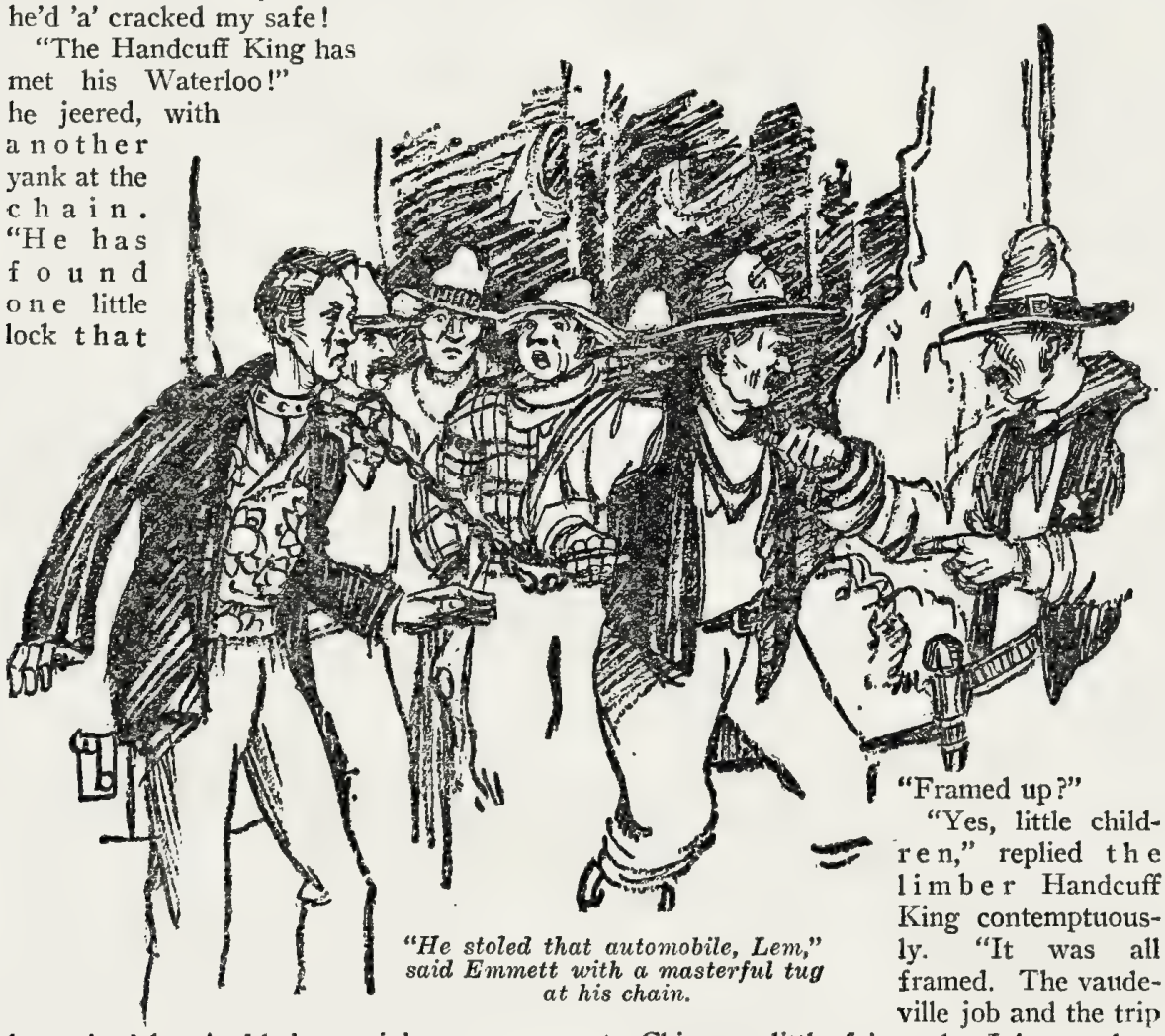
"I was kinda late gettin' here," began the sheriff excitedly, to Emmet. "When I got back from your place, I found that somebody had jest stoled Jess Berry's automobile, and I had to do a lot o' telephonin', tryin' to head him off. Soon's I got here to the Opry House I asked your boys where their quartette leader was at. They said he'd be back purty soon. So I hides behind this canvas to wait fer him."

"*He* stoled that automobile, Lem," said Emmet, with a masterful tug at his chain. "We just now rid in here to Piñon in it. What was he in jail fer, anyways?"

"Safe-crackin'."

"Thought so!" roared Emmet triumphantly. "He came out to my place to-night in that stoled car. Picked the lock on my door. When I woke up he was holdin' a chloroformed rag to my nose. And if I hadn't cracked him just then, I reckon he'd 'a' cracked my safe!

"The Handcuff King has met his Waterloo!" he jeered, with another yank at the chain. "He has found one little lock that he can't pick. And he's wearin' a new ornament that he can't wriggle out of!"



"He stoled that automobile, Lem," said Emmett with a masterful tug at his chain.

Jack Vellacott screwed his scrawny neck uncomfortably within the baffling confines of the dog-collar. He shrugged, and then a slight grin spread over his pale face.

"The jig's up, I guess," he admitted. "I'll have to go back to jail and break out all over again. Sure; I'll come clean. I knew that safe was a juicy haul, the first time I glimmed it. I saw I'd have to find some way of shaking these darn cowboys. And I framed up to get 'em in here this evening, so the odds wouldn't be so big against me on the job and I'd have a chance for a getaway. But I needed a pal with a hard hand. The rough stuff never was in my line—that's where I fell down."

The "Cowboy Harmonizers" surrounded him. "Framed up?" they gasped suspiciously. And they muttered it again: "Framed up?"

"Yes, little children," replied the limber Handcuff King contemptuously. "It was all framed. The vaudeville job and the trip to Chi were little fairy tales I invented to get you away from the ranch. You can't sing. That awful harmony of yours ought to be taken out somewhere and buried."

And then he backed away, pushing a forbidding palm toward the "Harmonizers" while with the other hand he grabbed at his nose.

"Sheriff," he choked, "take me away—to jail—anywhere! I've suffered enough al-

ready. They might take a notion to sing!"

Angry, indignant, and yet bowed and woebegone, the "Harmonizers" retired for a consultation. Presently they came straggling back to Emmet.

"Emmet," they began meekly—a quartette that ranged dismally from Dusty's thin tenor to Pete's husky bass, "will you take us back—if we quit our singin'?"

Emmet took them back. A week passed. But at the Diamond L there was a lack of harmony both social and vocal. The evening were interminable periods of time, spent over monotonous penny-ante or taken up with a gloomy conversation.

"I'll let you boys sing, if it'll perk you up any," grumbled Emmet Ryan finally, with the dropping of another dusk. "I'll try to put up with it. Make the first one 'Sweet Adeline'."

And so harmony rose again toward twinkling heavens. "Sweet Adeline" it was. Dusty's high tenor throbbed; Pete's bass growled tenderly; and Moxie and Bert mingled happily in between. *"At night, dear har-rut . . ."* they sang.

"He lied, that Vellacott son-of-a-gun!" decided Emmet Ryan, leaning back comfortably on his porch and cupping his ear toward the harmonious sounds. "It wouldn't do to tell 'em so. But, by doggies—the boys do sing purty good!"

LAST MOMENTS OF FAMOUS BADMEN

VARIED and sometimes unexpected were the last words and actions of famous badmen of the West. Some died talkative and joking, others kept silence, some begged for mercy, others were jerked into eternity swearing. Last acts may have been the taking of a smoke or a drink, and last words included such farewells as "Give me a chaw of tobacco, folks," and "Meet you in hell, fellers."

One of the best-known instances is that of Jack Gallegher. When the rope was placed about his neck he chose to be funny. "How do I look with a halter around my neck?" he asked a bystander. But as the moment for stringing up approached he continually called for whiskey, which the Vigilantes gave him. Just as the noose was tightened he yelled out, "I want one more drink before I die!" Disgustedly they slackened the rope and permitted him one last swig from a bottle. Then Gallegher, seeing he could not delay things any longer, began cursing those about him vehemently, and kept this up until his wind was cut off.

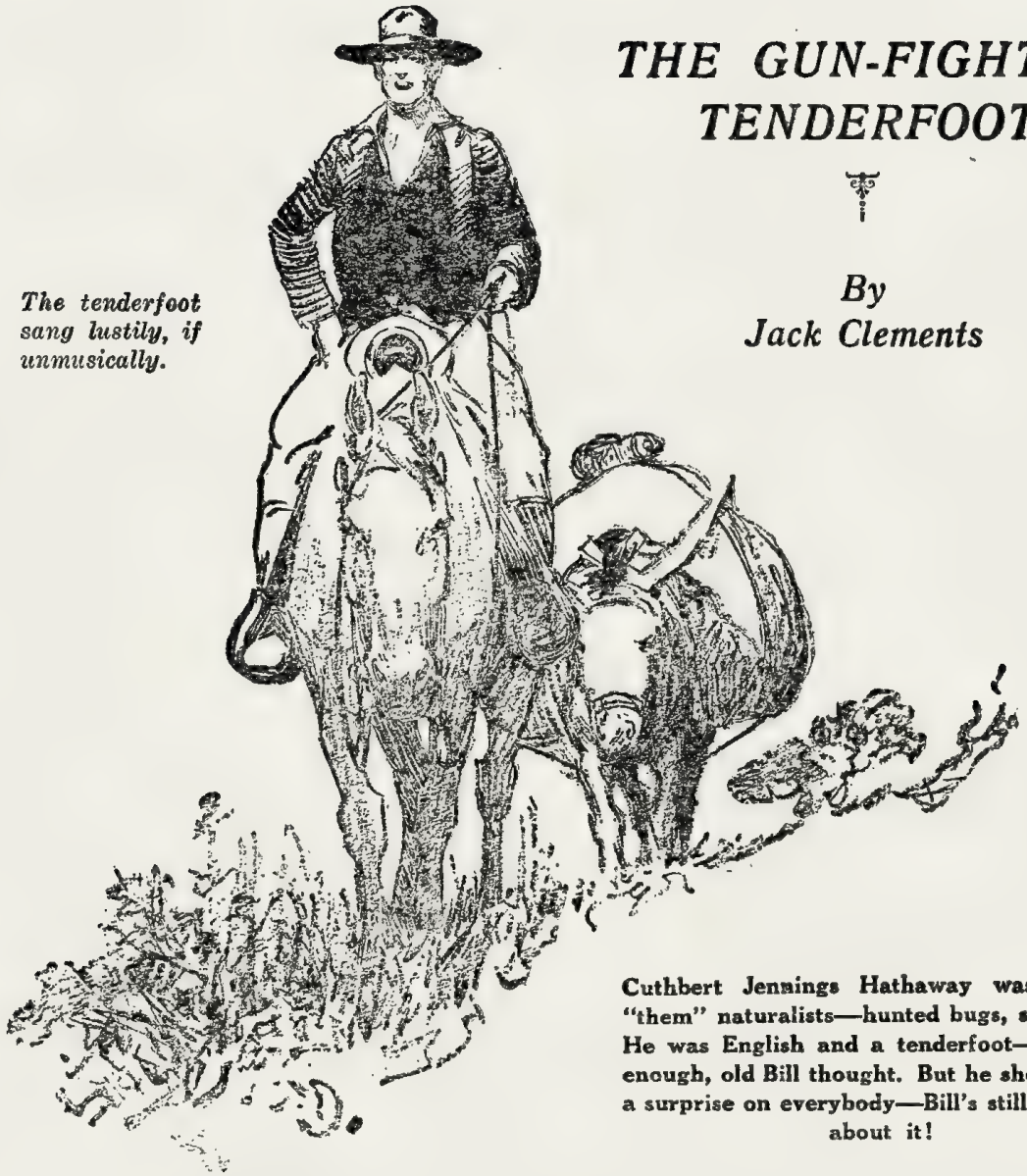
When Henry Plummer, the Montana outlaw of a hundred murders, and one of the most cold-blooded of any, was brought to justice, he begged his captors to cut off his ears, hands, tongue, disfigure him in any way, but to let him live. His last-minute assertion that he was too mean to die was no doubt true, yet it served him nothing. Dutch John, confederate of Plummer, asked, "How long will it take me to die? I never seen anyone hanged before." He was afraid of suffering and appeared comforted when told that death would be quick and sure. While Cy Skinner was being led to the scaffold he broke from those that held him and started to run, calling on the men to shoot him. They refused and hanged him as they intended. Hayes Lyons begged leave to see a certain woman to say good-by, but his request was not granted. It was this woman, supposed to be Lyons' sweetheart, who gave him away and brought about his capture.

One of the pluckiest ends was that of George Shears. He bore himself absolutely calm and indifferent. He was hanged in a barn of the ranch near where he was captured, and there being no special scaffold at hand, a ladder was used instead of a box or other drop. As he mounted the ladder he said, "Gentlemen, I am not used to this business, never having been hung before. Do I jump off or slide off?" When told to jump he yelled, "All right, here goes!" and leaped into space with utmost unconcern.

Bill Bunton was very particular how the knot was adjusted around his neck and asked, like many others, if he might jump off the platform himself. Having been given that permission he declared, "I don't care any more about hanging than I do about drinking a drink of water, but I'd like to have my neck broken. I wish I had a mountain 300 feet high to jump from. Now I'll give you the time: one—two—three! So-long!"

THE GUN-FIGHTIN' TENDERFOOT

By
Jack Clements



The tenderfoot sang lustily, if unmusically.

Cuthbert Jennings Hathaway was one of "them" naturalists—hunted bugs, so he said. He was English and a tenderfoot—harmless enough, old Bill thought. But he shore pulled a surprise on everybody—Bill's still chucklin' about it!

THROWING back his head, the tenderfoot sang lustily, if unmusically, beating time with the palm of his hand on the horn of the small saddle he rode. Suddenly, he paused in his vocal exercises, and turning his head, eyed the sedate-looking little burro that was attached to his saddle horse with a long lariat. The brute returned the look, then, waggling his long ears, bared his yellow teeth and brayed wheezingly, ending with a sort of sigh.

"So that is the way you welcome my solo, eh?" laughed the dapper little man. "I thought it was time you joined in with your beautiful tenor, as you usually do." He smiled again at the serious-eyed little beast. Then tapping the sides of the pinto he rode on, resuming his journey.

Topping a rise, the tenderfoot stood in the stirrups and surveyed the little cow town that lay sprawled below. "Wonder if that's Carson? I sure do hope so, for I'm quite exhausted, as are both these animals," he mused, and glanced at the dust-coated sides of the pony and burro. "Well, I will never know if that is my destination by staying up here. Whether it is the place I'm looking for or not, it is certain I will find a decent place to sleep, and a feed and rubdown for those poor brutes." Settling back in his seat, he rode down the hill into the alkali-covered village.

Once on the main street, he paused and

looked up and down it's dingy length to locate the hotel. Noticing a man standing in front of a saloon nearby, he dismounted and approached the idler. As the city man walked closer, he saw the loafer was a middle-aged man who chewed constantly on a cud of black tobacco, pausing momentarily to spit into the dusty thoroughfare.

"Is this the town of Carson, my good man?" inquired the tenderfoot, as the native squinted his eyes in preparation for another deluge. Eyeing the younger man from the toes of his fashionable riding boots to the crown of his neat Stetson, the tobacco chewer at length took careful aim at an unsuspecting fly that chanced to be near, and after noting the results of his marksmanship, replied in a lazy drawl.

"Wal, I reckon it ain't anything else, leastwise it was this mornin', though I'm bound to admit that yuh cain't tell anything about this durned country anymore, they're liable to change the name of the Union to-morrer." He squinted at the slim stranger again. As the tenderfoot made no attempt to reply to his remarkable speech, he added: "I kin see that yuh air a stranger in these parts, so I reckon it won't be imperlite to ax yuh if yuh air huntin' anyone in perticular, fer if yuh air, it's likely I kin tell yuh whar they kin be found, fer I know most folks hereabouts."

The little man cleared his dusty throat and spoke up.

"Why, no, I really wasn't looking for any person, but was directed to this vicinity by a man who said he was here a few years ago, and found the place peculiarly suited for one of my profession. I am a naturalist, you know." Whisking out a black leather traveling case, he tendered a card to the bewildered westerner. Taking the extended pasteboard gingerly between thumb and finger, the native shifted his cud to the other cheek, and read aloud:

"CUTHBERT JENNINGS HATHAWAY,
LONDON, ENGLAND."

"Jest what was it yuh said yuh done fer a livin', pard?" and he chewed with renewed zest.

With a twinkle in his brown eyes the Englishman explained patiently: "I am a bug hunter, my friend. Hunt all sorts of strange and unusual insects, you know."

"A bug hunter!" exclaimed the old puncher stepping back a pace, as though expecting the other to announce himself as Napoleon next, "strange an' unusual bugs? Why, feller, don't yuh know that all the bugs we got out heer is usual as hell, an' ain't strange a-tall, fer we all know 'em well?"

"Haw! Fancy now, isn't that ripping?" chuckled Hathaway, "he says that the insects in this part of the West are all very usual, and good friends of the inhabitants. Now my good man I prefer to differ with you on that point, for although doubtless they are very common to folks who have spent their lives among them, it will be a different story indeed when I introduce them in London. If you will be so kind as to direct me to a hotel, I will procure a room and bawth and trouble you no more. And thanks awfully, and all that sort of thing, you know," he added, as the gasping cowboy pointed out the sign suspended in front of the frame hotel a block away.

Turning, the naturalist was about to take up his bridle reins, when a man rode up at a gallop and, pulling cruelly on the Spanish bits, brought the black mare he bestrode to a sliding stop not three feet from the little tenderfoot's face. Leaning from the saddle, a black-featured individual with a livid scar over one eye poked a dirty thumb at Cuthbert Hathaway and said in a voice audible a hundred feet: "An' who might that little runt be, that yuh was a-palaverin' with, Jake?" He shot a look like that of a rattler about to strike, at the stranger.

"Who, him?" Jake made answer, visibly nervous by this time. "Why he calls hisself Cuthbert Jennings Hathaway, an' he comes from across the pond."

"I'll Cuthbert yuh, if yuh don't clear out of this heer town afore the sun sets," snarled the bully, pointing the same dirty thumb at Hathaway, who stood leaning carelessly against the side of his mount.

"I say, my good fellow, were you addressing your rude remarks to me?" queried Cuthbert at this. "If so, I wish to state that I am not at all interested in your attempt to impress me with your alleged boldness!"

"Don't 'good feller' me," howled the dark-faced ruffian, his dirty neck and face taking on a still more lowering look. "Yuh heerd what I said, an' if yuh air right smart, yuh will take the hint an' vamoose!"

"My word, but you are really an extraordinary and offending sort of person, you know," the Englishman rejoined to this last warlike declaration of the rider. "Quite unlike this gentleman, now," and he turned to where Jake was standing, eyes bulging and jaw sagging at this display of foolhardiness on the part of the foreign tenderfoot. Stepping a pace closer to the black mare, the little scientist pulled the heavy riding glove from his left hand and, holding it by the fingers, reached up and in a twinkling slapped the badman across his coarse-lipped mouth!

A small black automatic spat spitefully.

Several men who had emerged from the saloon and drawn near as the loud voice of the gunman reached their ears, fell back on both sides of the tenderfoot, leaving a clear path around him. That this action was a very significant one was demonstrated a second later, for, like a flash of light, the infuriated Westerner whipped his Colt from the holster and brought it to bear on the chest of the Englishman.

"If yuh was a real he-man, I wouldn't let yuh off so light," he bawled, "but seein' as yuh air a plumb fool, and new to these parts, all I'm gonna do is make yuh do the tenderfoot dance, so jump!"

Instead of doing as he was commanded, the tenderfoot did an unlooked-for thing. Before the man before him had time to press the trigger of his huge weapon, the little man raised both hands above his head in apparent fright. Then with the speed of thought, his right hand dived under the left lapel of the short riding coat he wore, and re-appearing, a small black automatic spat spitefully! With a howl of rage and pain, the man on the horse literally threw the Colt from him; grabbing his wrist where a thin thread of red was trickling down, he reeled in the saddle!

Turning his slim back, the Englishman said calmly: "Haw! you blighter, see if you can laugh that off, as you Americans

say, you know!" And he walked into the hotel office unhindered.

For thirty minutes after his exit from the scene, and the departure of the wounded man for the local doctor, the small crowd of men talked over the unheard-of happening. For a tenderfoot—and an Englishman at that—to best the most dangerous gunfighter of the locality was such an extraordinary event that several of the older men were still unable to grasp exactly what had happened.

Upon making inquiry at the desk next morning, Cuthbert was informed that he could probably secure board and lodging at the ranch of Bill Andrews, who lived five miles east of Carson. This ranch was the Double-X and lay along the Rio Grande on the American side.

As soon as Cuthbert explained his mission in the neighborhood, Bill Andrews agreed to the arrangement, for he had hesitated somewhat, thinking the little Britisher another tenderfoot come to the West to learn the art of punching cows. Bill was a kindly man, a veteran of the range country, and as such he didn't wish to instruct any city men in his business, for he remembered a previous experience of that kind, and was wary.

"But I say, Mr. Andrews, just what are your reasons for your cautioning me to confine my activities to the Double-X?" Cuthbert Hathaway asked, puffing at an obnoxious perfumed cigarette.

"Wa'l, Cuthbert, first I want to ax yuh to please not 'mister' me any more, I'm jest plain old Bill to all my old friends, so I reckon that handle is plumb good enough fer my new ones to call me by. Not that it ain't mighty nice and perlite of yuh to call me that, but somehow every time yuh does, I jest naturally expect yuh to point a six-gun at my innards and ax fer my roll." The old cattleman laughed heartily. "But to answer yore question, son. The reason fer my tellin' yuh to keep to my range is a-cause that place north of us is run by a durn fool callin' hisself Professor Bland. Him, an' two more like him, is all that lives there now and has fer a year or so. Him an' another man come from the East and hired that no account gunman that yuh run into in town when yuh first arrived. Soon as they got here and had that old rundown place leased, they drawed into their shells like a bunch of turtles, an' won't talk to no one a-tall. That puncher they hired give it out in town when they first lit that they was a passel of inventors tryin' to make some new-fangled kind of paper out of the cactus yuh kin see growin' all around this heer country. That may all be so, but 'tain't no reason fer 'em orderin' honest folks offen their place at the muzzle of a shotgun, like one of 'em did my foreman last week when he was huntin' some strays over on their place. So I say, if I was you, an' wanted to avoid trouble with that gang of skunks, I'd keep away from their fool paper-makin' ranch." Bill snorted in disgust at the thought of inventors invading the cow country.

"Paper inventors, eh?" said Cuthbert, "did you happen to see any of their machinery when they brought it here, Bill?"

"Nope, but one of my men did, an' he said that it was all crated up—come by wagon from Dallas, yuh know—and that the feller callin' hisself Professor Bland, set right on the wagon an' wouldn't let no one lay hands on any of 'em, 'cept him an' one of the men with him. Since then, though, they has sent out a powerful lot of boxes, and they all go to the same place, Chicago. Leastwise that what is rumored in Carson."

"Ah, I see," murmured Cuthbert softly, studying the tips of his small fingers intently. Then he changed the subject abruptly.

"My word, I almost forgot what it was I wanted to say—aw—Bill. May I borrow two of your most efficient revolvers? I find that the weapon with which I am armed is sometimes not to be depended upon. I encountered one of your bally rattling serpents this morning, and when I attempted to end the creature's life, my pistol failed to discharge, and the slimy thing escaped."

"My most efficient revolver?" repeated Bill, "why shore yuh can borry two of my six-guns, but I'm durned if I am able to tell yuh which one is the most efficient, fer they're all mighty good, I kin tell yuh." Rising from his seat on the veranda, the

ranchman entered the adobe house, to return in a moment with the weapons and a heavy belt.

Came midnight. Treading carefully, Cuthbert let himself out the back door of the ranch house. Entering the corral, he saddled his horse, led the beast a few yards from the buildings, then mounted and rode away.

As soon as he cleared the Double-X property, he pushed rapidly forward and was soon at the rear of the tumble-down stable of the ranch of the inventors. He tethered his horse and dropping to his hands and knees, crawled slowly toward the darkened house fifty feet distant. Once in the black shadow cast by the structure, he rose and applied his eye to a crack in the shutters that covered the windows. An exclamation escaped him. Keeping up his vigil, he was unaware of a man who stepped around the corner of the structure.

Suddenly the man with the lantern stopped dead.

A jangling of spurs warned him of the danger. He had barely flattened himself against the wall when the fellow passed so near that his swinging arms almost touched the hidden man. As soon as the slamming of the front door told of his entrance to the house, Cuthbert lost no time. Again assuming his crouched position, he crawled as quickly as possible in the direction of his horse.

Halfway to the old stable, he began to breathe a bit more freely, when the door of the ranch house was unexpectedly thrown open and the yard flooded with a dim light from a lamp that stood upon a table just within the room. Two men emerged, one armed with a rifle, the other carrying an old-fashioned oil lantern.

"I thought I shore heerd a hoss stompin' when I came by the barn," the man with the rifle was saying, "anyway, it ain't gonna do no hurt to have a look around, fer we don't want no galoots snoopin' now that we are all set fer a clean-up."

Suddenly, the man with the lantern stopped dead in his tracks. Holding the light high above his head, he peered intently at the spot where Cuthbert was lying in the long grass! The light still aloft, he whispered to his companion. The armed man bent forward a moment, then throwing the rifle to his thick shoulder, drew bead on the form of the Englishman!

As the fellow threw the lever that pumped a shell into the chamber of the weapon,

Cuthbert raised his head and, before the marksman had time to regain his lost aim, leaped to his feet and scurried from sight behind the rotting stable.

A hail of lead was plumped into the logs of the stable, but they were of no avail, for in long rabbitlike bounds, Cuthbert leaped to his waiting horse, vaulted into the saddle, and was off through the cottonwoods before the two men had time to reach the corner of the old building and open fire upon him. Pushing his horse to the utmost speed, he rode recklessly for a few minutes, then as no sounds indicating pursuit reached him, he slowed to a calmer loping, for it was dangerous to ride blindly in an unknown country.

At the Double-X he succeeded in getting his pinto into the corral, and entering his room unobserved. Worn out by the night's excitement, he soon fell asleep.

The following night, Cuthbert again slipped from the house and rode away as before. Leaving his horse in the trees behind the ancient stable, he walked quietly around the corner of the log walls and into the ranch yard. This time he did not drop to his knees and creep upon the darkened house, but, walking softly to the front door, knocked loudly, then stepped to one side.

The low murmur of voices inside stopped at once; heavy footsteps clumped across the board floor. Then, as the door was jerked violently open, a bullet-shaped head was thrust into the night.

As the head came into view, Cuthbert brought the butt of the .45 he carried down with a sickening crash on the base of the skull, and the owner fell sprawling into the yard, his face turned to the starry sky.

Leaping over the body of his victim, the Britisher bounded into the lighted room, and, a pistol in each hand, commanded:

"Hands up, both of you, quick!"

To say that the two men in the room were astonished would be putting it mildly; they were paralyzed.

Then, when his command was not obeyed, both guns in the hands of the tenderfoot belched fire; a bullet sped past the ear of the dumbfounded twain. They regained the use of their faculties with a rush.

Dropping his left-hand gun into the holster at his side, Cuthbert was about to start around the little pine table on which stood the glass lamp when the larger of the two men stared fixedly into the little scientist's face for a moment, then raising his chap-clad knee, brought it up with a crash. The table and lamp went smashingly into a corner.

As the room was thus plunged into Stygian blackness, Cuthbert lost no time. Dropping in his steps, he crawled as rapidly as possible to one side of the door. Just in time too, for a second later the darkness was stabbed by a flash of red flame and the deafening roar of a .45.

As the flash lighted the room for a brief second, the tenderfoot saw one of the men creeping slowly toward him. Rising like a wraith, the Englishman waited with upraised Colt, and when the fellow was within three feet of him, he flung the weapon at him. With a thud it hit the larger man between the eyes and he fell like a stricken ox under the hammer.

Wheeling, Cuthbert was just in time to see the other occupant of the room disappearing through the open door. Like the streak of a frightened ferret, he was after him, landing with a jolt on the man's broad back. Together they rolled to the yard.

Cuthbert soon discovered that he was no match for the larger, heavier man. Losing ground rapidly, the smaller man suddenly went limp in his opponent's arms.

As the panting cowboy rose to his feet and started to run, the little man came to life, jammed his left-hand gun—he had lost the other in the struggle—into the ribs of the puffing puncher and hissed: "Up quick, or out goes your light!"

This time there was no hesitancy on the part of the other man—he fairly jammed his hands into the air.

Bill Andrews was awakened from a sound slumber by someone shouting and kicking the front steps. Grumblingly, the cattleman arose and stalking to the door, flung it open sleepily with the muffled threat to "tear some drunken cowhand's arms and legs plumb off if he didn't cut out his

damned noise!" But all sleep fled when he saw the strange sight gathered in his yard. For there stood his tenderfoot boarder with three men, whose hands stretched high at the point of the city man's guns!

"What in tarnation air yuh doin' out thar, Cuthbert?" bellowed Bill, as this scene didn't change when he blinked his eyes rapidly.

"Haw! I say, Bill, old bean, isn't this a ripping evening to go hunting for American snipe?" laughed Cuthbert, "and who is here to gainsay my claim to as nice a bag of birds as ever graced the border?" He laughed again when the bewildered Bill still stood and stared with uncomprehending eyes. As the rancher made no move to answer, he added: "Bill, these gentlemen will catch their death of cold standing out here in the night air. Why do you not invite them into your home?"

At last Bill seemed to realize what was happening. Stepping to the veranda he peered into the faces of the prisoners. "Hell!" he exclaimed, "it's that fool Perfessor!"

"Yes, that is exactly who it is, all right, and I am bound to inform you that he seemed to have an excess of Uncle Sam's greenbacks on hand. Knowing that to be a fact, I felt it my duty to relieve him of the responsibility of caring for that vast fortune he had stored at his 'paper ranch,' and so brought him to you, Bill!" This from Cuthbert in a tone of sarcasm.

"Aw, hell! What do you want to rub it in for?" burst out the prisoner garbed in cowboy's outfit. "Take us on to jail and be done with it, why don't yuh?" He subsided with a growl of protest when the Colt was pushed into his ribs, however.

"Snipe? Money? Jail?" stuttered Bill at all this. "What in the name of Saint Nick is going on out here anyway?"

"William, if you will assist me in rendering these harmless children still more peaceable by the aid of a little lariat rope, I will contrive to explain this deep, dark mystery," remarked the tenderfoot, and marched the trio into the front room of the house without more ado.

Thirty minutes later, when the last of the prisoners had been securely bound and stowed in the kitchen, Cuthbert propped his feet upon the table, rolled a real hand-made cigarette, and inhaled deeply a few times.

"Bill," he began," you haven't the slightest idea what a relief it is to me to get a real smoke after pulling away at those dainty mama-boy fags for the last week or so." Throwing the offending smokes into the corner, he went on. "Seemed to me, you knew I didn' really like those things, for every time I got close to you, you'd blow some of the most fragrant smoke imaginable into my face until I nearly grabbed the cigarette out of your hand, two or three times. Now to explain what you are fairly dying to hear—oh I can see you fidgeting in your chair—I will have to start at the beginning of the tale, and bring it up to date. In the first place, I am not an Englishman, but an American like yourself, as you have probably guessed during the last few minutes of my conversation. Nope, I was born in the good old U. S. A. and raised in the same, I am proud to say. But having been in England, it was handy to know how those people across the Atlantic actually act and talk, and also just as useful to know how the majority of Americans *think* they talk and act. I might add that they do NOT act like I did when impersonating one. My reason for the imitation was that I am a detective—keep your seat Bill—and was obliged to disguise myself in some manner so that I would give the impression of being quite absent-minded and harmless. As I knew that the Western American regarded the English sport as such a harmless individual, I pretended to be a visitor from across the sea. Also as I had need to roam about the country quite a bit, I figured that, if I were to be a naturalist, it would afford me the opportunity to snoop where the fancy struck me as being a likely place to find what I was seeking.

"My father conducts a detective agency back East, Bill, and when I had finished school he offered to take me into the firm as a member. But, like most boys, I wanted to have a good time first. This time I proceeded to have, and found that it was ashes in my mouth. Then I asked the old

man to repeat his offer; he was obdurate, and said, 'nothing doing,' or words to that effect.

"Finally one day he sent for me, and handed me a circular advertising a counterfeiter wanted by the Government. Here he said, was the chance I wanted; if I made good he would repent and take me into the firm as a partner. But what seemed at first to be a swell chance, was soon discounted, for he laid down the condition that I must capture this money-maker by my lonesome. As the Department of Justice had agents working on the case, you can see what a fat chance I had to get in ahead of them on the money offered as reward.

"The only clue that was worth while at all, was one offered by one of Dad's men stationed at Chicago. This operative said that he had succeeded in tracing a shipment from that city, but from there he lost the trail and couldn't say where it came from, only knowing it was somewhere in western Kansas.

"To Kansas I hurried, and was lucky enough to learn in Wichita that the shipment my father's man had found, was probably sent from somewhere on the Mexican border in Texas. Therefore to Texas I came; eventually I landed in Carson. You told me of the strange ranch where the owner was an inventor, seeking to make paper out of cactus. That looked mighty good to me after that long chase around the country. I went spying last night.

"Just as I suspected, those cultured gentlemen over there were packing a big wooden box with frogskins, putting waste paper around the 'queer' to take up room. I nearly got it in the neck, though, when they came out and saw me in the yard.

"To-night, I went back to visit them again. Behold the result."

"Well, I'll be double durned," exclaimed the old cattleman as Cuthbert finished this strange narrative, "now who in thunder would a thunk that yuh was not a Englishman, and a dee-tective instead? I'm a cross-eyed horn toad if that ain't a good un on me." He stared at his guest as though seeing him for the first time! "A Englishman hunting bugs, what wasn't no bug hunter a-tall, an' a inventor what was a counterfeiter! An' to top it all off, the fake Englishman was a gunfightin' tenderfoot!" And he hurried from the room to tell the boys in the bunkhouse the news.

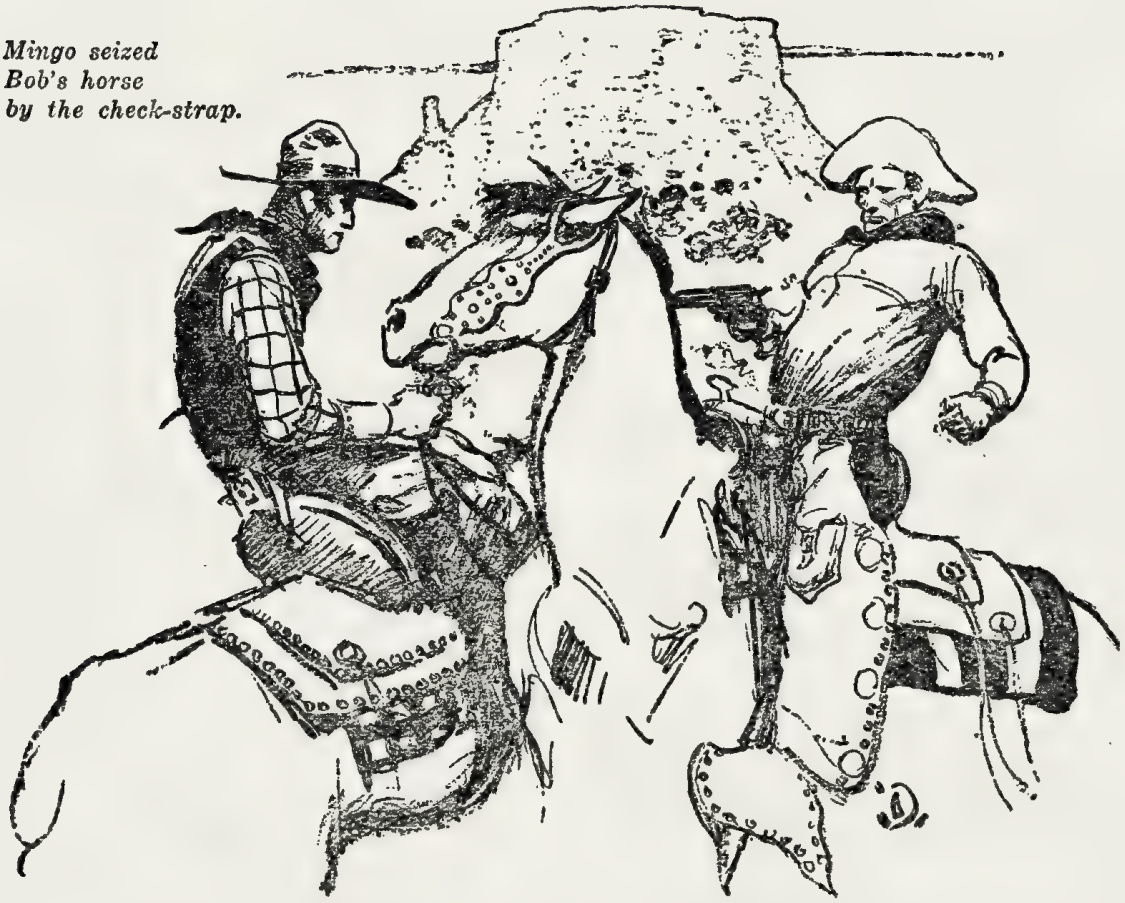
Two weeks later, Jake, the tobacco-chewing cowboy, rode into the ranch yard, and leaving his lathered pony at the steps, hastened into the front of the house without pausing to knock. There he found Bill Andrews deep in a game of stud poker with his foreman. He handed the rancher a yellow envelope he drew from his flannel shirt front.

"Bill, this came this mornin' from Dallas by stage, and as I knowed yuh had reelatives in the East an' some of them might be dead, I brung it right out to yuh." Jake dropped into a chair.

With trembling hands Bill tore the flap of the telegram. As his eye skimmed over the contents, he handed the message to Jake with a chuckle. Jake read the wire aloud:

"ARRIVED HOME GOT POSITION AND REWARD. REGARDS TO BOYS. THE GUNFIGHTIN' TENDERFOOT."

"Well, I'll be double durned again," exclaimed Bill.



Mingo seized Bob's horse by the check-strap.

MINGO OF THE CIRCLE DOT

A SIX-PART SERIAL

By W. D. Hoffman

PART TWO

Read the complete details in the opening paragraphs of what has happened and go on with the story.

MINGO HAWS, cowman, formerly El Tigre of the Texas Rangers and El Paso mounted police, goes to Hidden Valley in answer to the written summons of his old friend, Bill Wilcox.

There is a range war between Bill's ranch, the Bar W, and Lew Sagamore's Circle Dot. According to Bill's note, Trick Tyrone, an outlaw who seven years before had shot El Tigre, is among the imported gunmen on Lew Sagamore's ranch.

On the westbound train Bill's note is caught by a breeze and carried across the aisle. The girl opposite Mingo returns it, but does not enter conversation with him. He wonders whether she saw Bill's signature or any of the message.

At Chavez he leaves the train. The girl, who has also left it, nods curtly to him and directs him to the Bar W—Bill's ranch. Then she *did* see the signature—if not more—of Bill's note.

From Carl Sands at Chavez, Mingo learns that the girl is Sagamore's daughter, Prim.

Prim refuses Mingo's offer to escort her, and Mingo goes down the trail a short distance behind her. She gallops back to warn him to steer clear of the 'Dobe Tombs, two houses on the disputed ground over which the range feud started. Moved by curiosity, Mingo rides to the 'Dobe ruins. Sprawled out in one house is the body of a dead puncher. As Mingo steps toward the doorway, he hears the report of a rifle, and feels the slash of a knife blade in his side. A thorough search in both 'dobe houses brings him no clue to the mysterious Tombs assassins.

Five Circle Dot men ride up and surround him. A little, swarthy, flat-nosed man called Tevizon accuses him of killing the Circle Dot puncher and orders him to draw. Mingo with a swift motion beats him to the draw, has him covered. But one of the other men steals up behind him and is about to shoot when the arrival of Lew Sagamore and Prim ends the quarrel. Sagamore takes Mingo on as a puncher for Circle Dot.

Mingo stays alone at the Tombs, hoping to discover the hiding place of the assassins. He shoots at a half-exposed revolver barrel, but a rifle from another direction gets him. Everything grows black as he falls.

When he regains consciousness he is in the Circle Dot ranch house. Prim tells him she believes Tevizon and his friends are keeping up the feud for some purpose of their own, but she cannot convince her father that the Bar W is not altogether to blame. Mingo learns, too, not without pain, that Prim was engaged to marry Bob Wilcox, Bill's son, when the feud started.

Mingo pledges himself to do all he possibly can to clear up the baffling mystery of the 'Dobe Tombs killings and bring Bob and Prim together again.

When Mingo leaves the ranch house he encounters Bert Langre, a tall puncher who is in love with Prim. Langre has overheard part of his conversation with Prim. Believing Mingo to be a friend of the Bar W and a spy on the Circle Dot trying to patch up the breach between Prim Sagamore and Bob Wilcox, he challenges Mingo.

"If you think I haven't got guts to fight for Miss Prim against Bar W or any Tehanner that ever packed a gun," Langre rages at Mingo, "draw, damn yuh!"

CHAPTER VIII

A Threatened Arrest

MINGO HAWS did not draw, then, for the good reason that he discounted the words of the angry puncher, who, seeking favor with Prim, had been enraged by overhearing part of the conversation on the veranda. The Texan did not fear Langre, did not think he would even make a pass for his gun. Yet he realized the menace in Tevizon, lurking in the background by the bunkhouse. It was possible that Langre had had exchanges with Tevizon and that the gunman was ready to strike during a row between the Texan and the dark-eyed suitor. Mingo's gaze was centered past Langre, on Tevizon, as he made reply:

"Come here, Tevizon, where I can see you!"

The diminutive gunman remained standing for a matter of seconds, while Langre bent forward, in belligerent attitude, hands moving nervously at his sides. Mingo was prepared to enforce his command with a leveled gun when Tevizon began to saunter out into the open yard, in an attitude that told he had considered the situation well and, for the time being, had decided not to make a showdown. As Tevizon neared the tall puncher, the Texan spoke:

"Been eavesdropping, Langre?"

"I was sitting on the steps, and couldn't help hearing some of that talk, hombre!" His dark eyes glowed wildly. "Heard what was said about that rat Bob Wilcox and Miss Prim marrying him, against her dad's wish. I'll tell you something. You'll be a wise waddy if yuh keep yore rope away from any private business having to do with Lew Sagamore's daughter, sabe? You're on my range, hombre, when yuh start hornin' in between me and Bob Wilcox!" He made a flourish with his gun hand that indicated he thought better of contesting with pistols then.

Mingo chuckled. "Between you and Bob Wilcox? Didn't reckon I was romping on anybody's toes, doing the *lady* a favor. Seems like you're not exactly ace-high with her, boy!"

The other's lips quivered in ill-controlled rage. He spat out excited words: "Fixing up a rep for a gunfighter, ain't yuh, hombre, pulling the fancy with Tevizon! You don't know what you're doing, fighting-man! Not any! I was never extry slow, myself, either. I'll do yuh a favor by passing along one other bit of advice, man from Texas! Stay out of 'Dobe Draw, if yuh know what's good for yuh. The best gunfighter alive can't buck that game —I'm telling you for the good of one Texas

puncher and his *amigo,* Bill Wilcox. I'd advise yuh to go to Bar W in the morning!"

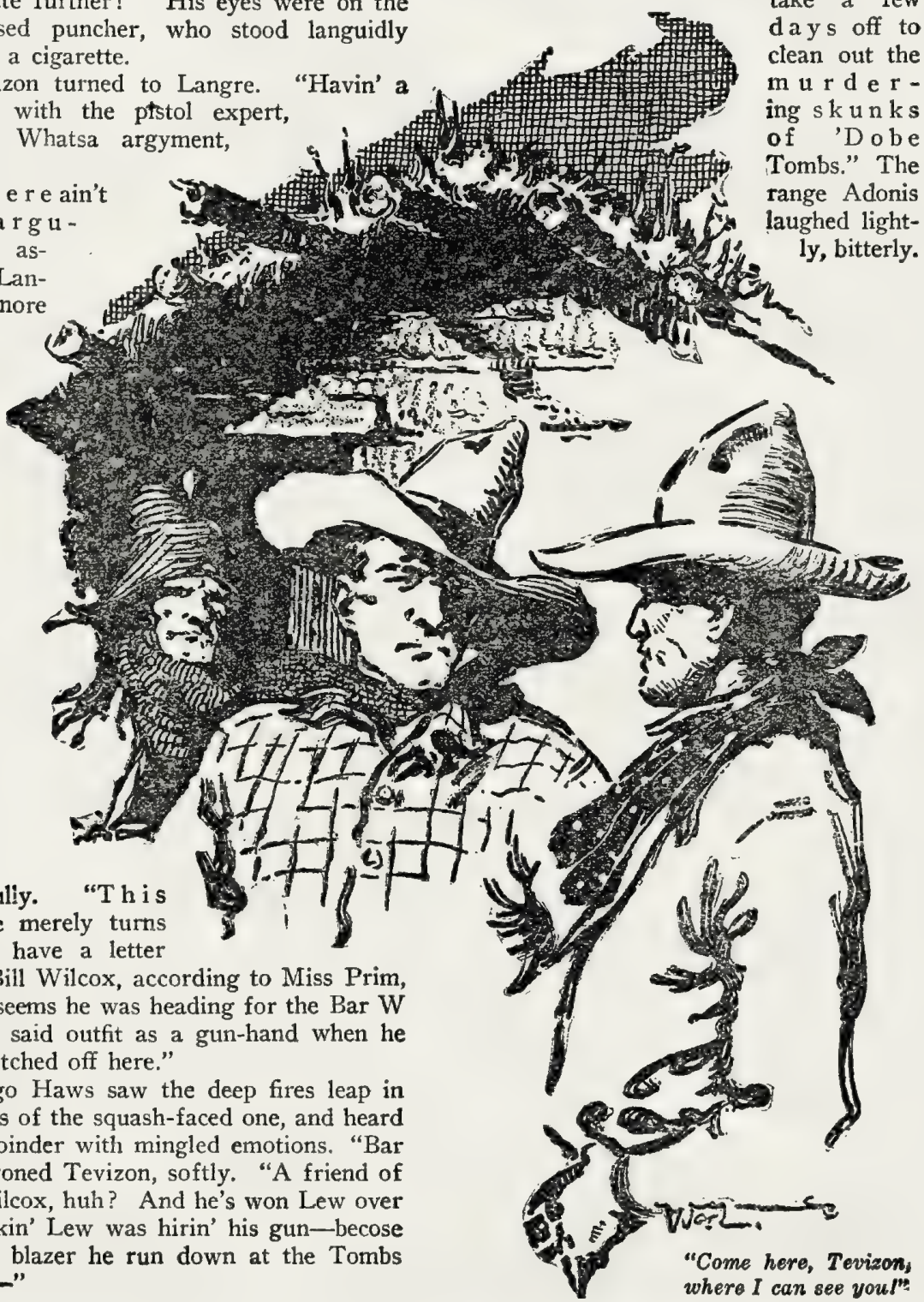
"Thanks," returned Mingo, blithely. "You seem to know a mite about 'Dobe Tombs! Wonder if your friend here can't elucidate further!" His eyes were on the flat-nosed puncher, who stood languidly licking a cigarette.

Tevizon turned to Langre. "Havin' a run-in with the pistol expert, huh? Whatsa argyment, Bert?"

"There ain't any argument," asserted Langre, more cheerfully. "This hombre merely turns out to have a letter from Bill Wilcox, according to Miss Prim, and it seems he was heading for the Bar W to join said outfit as a gun-hand when he got switched off here."

Mingo Haws saw the deep fires leap in the eyes of the squash-faced one, and heard the rejoinder with mingled emotions. "Bar W," droned Tevizon, softly. "A friend of Bill Wilcox, huh? And he's won Lew over to thinkin' Lew was hirin' his gun—becose of that blazer he run down at the Tombs on me—"

"That ain't all!" broke in Langre, swaying again belligerently. "He's going to make friends of Bar W and Circle Dot—for Miss Prim's sake—so's she and Bob Wilcox can keep company again! Besides that little job, this gent has set himself to take a few days off to clean out the murdering skunks of 'Dobe Tombs." The range Adonis laughed lightly, bitterly.



"Come here, Tevizon, where I can see you!"

"What the hell you think of that, Tev?"

Tevizon's deep-set eyes were on the man from Van Horn. "If I hadn't seen this waddy draw a gun, I'd say he was a plumb fool," he affirmed, quietly. "But he ain't by no means as innercent as he looks." He drew up toward the lanky man in the near darkness. "Hombre, you recollect what I told you down at the 'Dobes, about you not bein' wanted on this man's range? You've been in bed most of the time since, and nothin' more was said. To-morrer, accordin' to Pete York, you start ridin' herd. Now, I'll tell you somethin'." His bony jaw thrust outward.

With a quick motion, made possible by Tevizon's nearness, the Texan reached with two hands, and when he backed away, the other's two six-shooters were not in their accustomed holsters, but in Mingo's hands. "Go on, say it!" grinned the Texan.

Tevizon was staring, sputtering unintelligible words.

"Say it!" snapped Mingo Haws.

"You ain't goin' to ride with Circle Dot, as no spy!" flung out the disarmed puncher, savagely. "There's exactly six men on this range that'll rassle forty-fives with yuh the minute they know yo're a Wilcox man. If you don't take the train out of Hidden Valley to-morrer, hombre, yo're a dead cowboy, in spite of havin' my guns. Savvy the burro?"

"Much obliged." Mingo tossed the confiscated guns at the other's feet, drew his own and waited until Tevizon had dutifully holstered his. "I reckon I'll stay," he added cheerfully.

He turned, surprised, at Prim Sagamore's voice:

"I want to see you, Bert."

Langre came forward, and Prim motioned to Mingo. They drew away from Tevizon.

"I've heard you," said the girl, quietly. "Did you catch *all* we said?"

"No," gulped the abashed Adonis. "Only a little bit."

"Have you told Tevizon any more than you said just now?"

"Not a word, Miss Prim. Not a—"

"Promise me you won't tell him more—if you heard more."

"Shore—if you ask me, Miss Prim. I'm plumb sorry."

"You're all right, Langre, true to Circle Dot, I know. I'd advise you to have as little to do with Tevizon as possible. That's all."

As Langre scraped away through the dust, crest-fallen, Prim turned again to Mingo. "He will keep his promise. I was afraid he might have repeated about El Tigre to Tevizon. If Tevizon is Trick Tyrone, he might know about El Tigre, mightn't he?"

"He might," admitted Mingo, grimly. "He thinks he killed El Tigre in El Paso. I'm glad you think Langre can be trusted."

"He means well—is only a tool, and doesn't know what Tevizon is up to."

There was one other danger that Prim had not mentioned that troubled Mingo as he rolled into bed that night. Tevizon would lose no time in telling Lew Sagamore what he had heard about the Texan being a Wilcox spy.

He resolved that if it came to a showdown, he would not deny to Sagamore his friendship for Wilcox, though he knew such admission would end his usefulness at the Circle Dot. He would tell Sagamore frankly that his sole quarrel on the range was with the 'Dobe Tombs murderers. He would promise to get them, whether he worked on the Circle Dot or the Bar W.

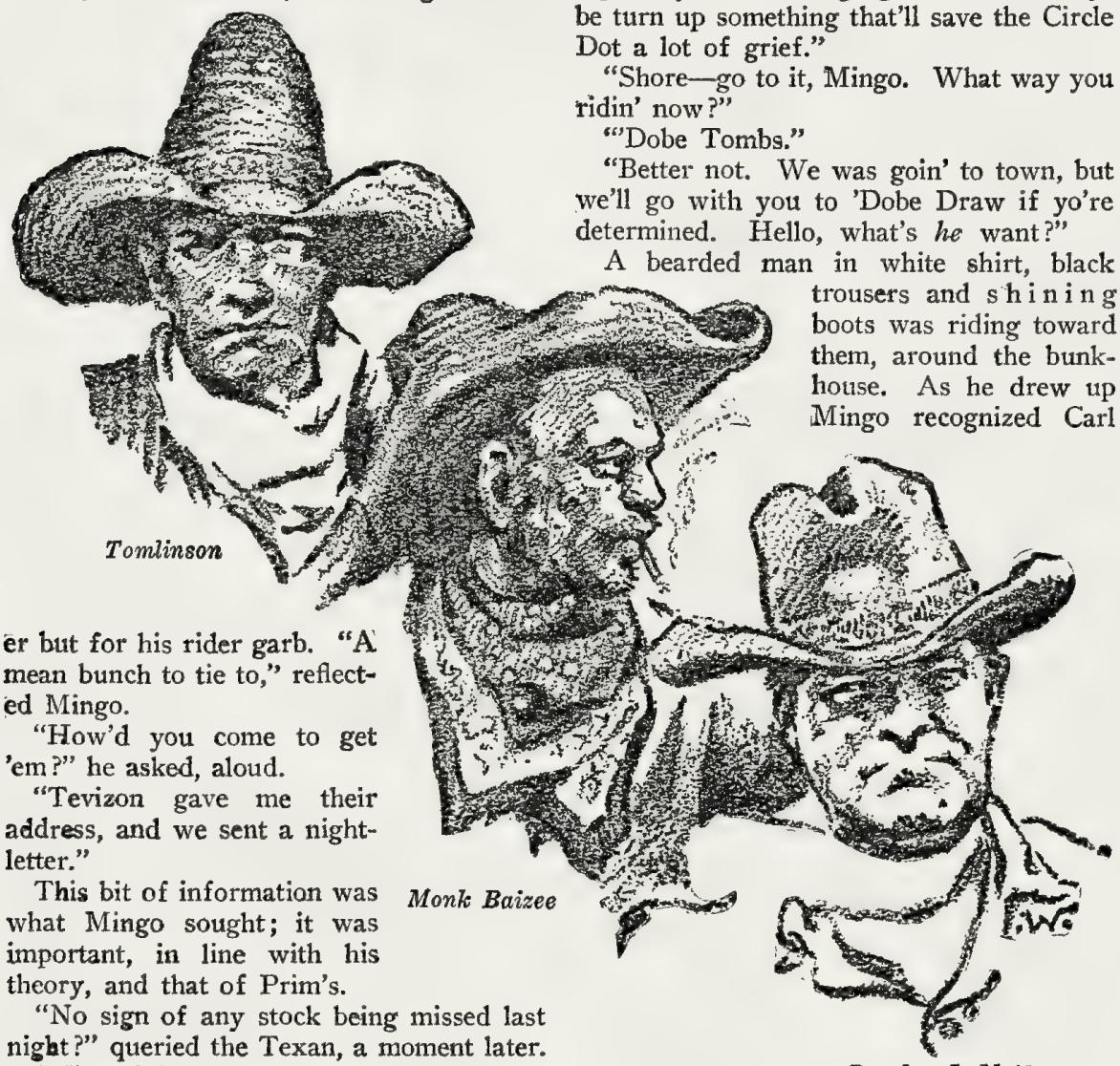
In the morning when the Texan appeared at the horse corral at daylight, Lew Sagamore and York were already saddled up. "Sho! Didn't expect yuh this early," grinned the boss. "Cows is all pastured and won't ship till to-morrow morning. Boys'll move 'em to the pens at Chavez this evenin'."

"Noticed that bunch there saddling up." Mingo gestured to three surly-looking punchers, heavy-eyed, who looked as though they had lost sleep the night before.

"Them's Monk Baizee, Tomlinson and Powder LaMotte. New men I brung in couple weeks ago—might need 'em, and they're handy with sixes. Think they got to git up early to earn their wages, there bein' nothin' for them to do." The cowman chuckled.

Mingo observed the three with interest.

He had seen two of them casually, during the days he was able to stroll about on the veranda. One, who resembled a Chinese, with mere slits of slanting eyes, Mingo learned afterward was Monk Baizee. Tomlinson was a hard-bitten, bow-legged, wrinkled puncher, whose glance was shifty, ever-roving. Powder LaMotte was clean-shaven, double-chinned, resembling a banker but for his rider garb. "A mean bunch to tie to," reflected Mingo.



Tomlinson

Monk Baizee

Powder LaMotte

"How'd you come to get 'em?" he asked, aloud.

"Tevizon gave me their address, and we sent a night-letter."

This bit of information was what Mingo sought; it was important, in line with his theory, and that of Prim's.

"No sign of any stock being missed last night?" queried the Texan, a moment later.

"Nix. We'd have heard. Got men on watch, near the Tombs, and Panther and Jim Ash will guard the stock at the pens to-night, at the railroad. Why?"

"Just was wondering." Mingo changed the subject. "You hired those three for their guns, mostly?"

"Likely I did."

"Mr. Sagamore, you employed me to ride herd, but I reckon it's no secret you're hiring me for my gun too?" the Texan asked.

The cowman coughed, rubbed his square, bronzed chin, then grinned. "Mayhap, partly," he admitted, fidgeting.

"If that's the case, there's one thing I'd like to ask. Turn me loose a couple weeks, to go it alone. Have a personal grudge against the party that fired that last shot, especially. I aim to go get him—and maybe turn up something that'll save the Circle Dot a lot of grief."

"Shore—go to it, Mingo. What way you ridin' now?"

"'Dobe Tombs."

"Better not. We was goin' to town, but we'll go with you to 'Dobe Draw if yo're determined. Hello, what's *he* want?"

A bearded man in white shirt, black trousers and shining boots was riding toward them, around the bunkhouse. As he drew up Mingo recognized Carl Sands, Chavez trader.

"Why you all dolled up, Carl?" grinned Sagamore.

Sands dismounted, face grave. " 'Tended a dance last night, clean over to Mayville. Come through Ranger, late, and Hatch Lambert fixed me up a blanket at the Jinglebob Saloon. Heard somethin' there." He

made a face, spat copiously, and went on.

"I'm neutral, as you gents kin vouch. I'm a friend of yours, and Bill Wilcox, too. But if it come to a showdown, I'd be with Lew Sagamore. That's me. I don't say much—ain't much for small talk—close-mouthed, if I do say it myself."

"Go on," grunted Sagamore.

"I heard somethin'. You folks understands, now—don't let this go no farder. Act upon it, of course—if yuh have a mind to. But keep me out of it—I'm neutral." He gnawed off a fresh chew.

Sagamore mounted, gesturing impatiently. Carl Sands made a sour face. "Of course, if yuh don't want to hear about one of yore men bein' laid for—"

"Go on—"

"Bein' laid for, why, ride along. I figured anyway Mister Haws would like to know, bein' it's him that's to be potted the minute he shows in Ranger this mornin'!" He rolled his eyes, turned to the saddle.

"Who's goin' to do said shootin'?" demanded Sagamore. "Mister Haws ain't even goin' to Ranger."

"I ain't talkin'. I don't want any tales told about what Carl Sands was reckoned to have said. Folks knows me too well for that. It was in the Jinglebob. I heard Full-House Cox tell some hombre—I don't know his voice—must be one of them new men on this range—Bar W man from Utah-way, likely. Full-House was sayin' how he'd git this new shootin' fool from Texas, as he called Mister Haws, when he come to town this mornin'. Figured to git him into the Jinglebob, and try his gun hand on him. More'n that I ain't sayin'."

Close-mouthed Carl departed with voluble exclamations about being late getting home, having accommodations for the boys bringing the herd to the shipping pens that night, etc. Mingo turned to Lew Sagamore.

"Reckon I won't go to the Tombs this mornin'. Think I'll trail to Ranger—might see that hairy face I've been looking for."

"We're ridin' that way, too."

"I'd rather you'd not."

"Yeah, we'll go, like we planned in the first place. I was goin' to see the sheriff, and demand the arrest of Bill Wilcox. This makes me sot on it. Hell will pop when I do, but there ain't no other way out."

They swung their mounts southward.

CHAPTER IX

A Link In The Chain

MINGO HAWS rode with the Circle Dot pair for a time in silence. He regretted that the ranch boss and his foreman had joined him in the ride to Ranger. He did not want to have a hand in a move to jail his friend Wilcox, and he did not want Sagamore to count on him to go gunning for Bar W men, without proof of their connection with the 'Dobe Tombs slayings, even if threats were made. This Full-House Cox may have merely been drinking and engaging in loose talk. Yet from what he had heard about Cox, and the suspicion that he had started the range war by killing the first of the Circle Dot men, he wanted to have a look at this individual. Full-House may have been one of the band, operating on both ranches, that Mingo was satisfied was under the leadership of Tevizon.

Mingo recalled Tevizon's words that there were *six* men who would try to kill him if he did not leave Hidden Valley. From what Prim had said, he eliminated Langre from this number. There remained Tevizon and the three importees whom he had brought to the Circle Dot—Monk Baizee, Tomlinson and Powder LaMotte, making four. There were probably two others of the band operating on the Wilcox outfit.

'Dobe Tombs could wait at least until Mingo had seen Full-House Cox, and direct light might be shed on the mysterious murders from what he saw in Ranger.

They had not gone beyond the pebble buttes on the way to town when Mingo saw a rider pursuing, in light blue shirt and brown skirt. He recognized Prim. They halted, and Sagamore frowned.

"You didn't wait for me, Daddy!" called the girl, reprovingly, as she joined them.

"Sho', I plumb forgot," grumbled the cowman. "But you better pick some other day to do yore shoppin'." She pleaded, and Sagamore yielded, exchanging a glance

with Mingo, saying they would have to separate in town.

"Of course, I don't want you along," she laughed.

Mingo judged that Sagamore had not forgotten to wait for Prim, but had hoped she would oversleep. From what she had said the evening before, the Texan thought that Sagamore was keeping his daughter away from Ranger as much as possible—Bob Wilcox might spend much of his time there. Then there was the matter of the threat of Full-House to shoot the new puncher from Texas.

Prim, light-hearted, flashing pearly teeth, fell in beside Mingo. "When I am through, if Daddy forgets to wait for me, I shall have to depend upon you, Mr. Haws!"

Mingo nodded. "It'll be my pleasure, Miss." Her father, riding on the other side, lost his frown. "Mingo'll likely be too busy to be botherin' escortin' girls," he said, seriously, but a slight grin broke on his features. The Texan felt that Lew Sagamore was pleased that his daughter had picked Mingo as riding companion. Was it because he hoped she might forget Bob Wilcox in the presence of this new man on the range?

There was no doubt that Sagamore himself had taken a decided liking to his new rider. Neither Tevizon nor Langre had yet reached his ear with spy charges, Mingo reflected.

A horse in the distance, approaching from Ranger, attracted their attention. "Panther Treek," grunted Sagamore. "He went over to that dance at Mayville, too." When the red-cheeked puncher drew up his eyes were wide with news.

"Heard the latest?"

"What's now?" demanded his boss.

"Raid on the Bar W! We're gettin' hell—bein' blamed. They cut into Wilcox's bunch, for a hundred head. Would 'a' got five hundred if they wasn't scared off. They shot Boxer Wilds in the laig. But Wilcox men give pursuit, and corraled the stolen bunch just acrost the Santa Fé tracks—but the raiders got away, clean. It was eleven o'clock last night."

"Got all their cows back?" demanded Sagamore.

"Every head, but they're threatenin' murder. You'll hear all about it in town."

Sagamore gestured impatiently, dismissing Treek, turning to Mingo. "Course them skunks will lay it onto Circle Dot, like they done these killin's of their men!"

"You reckon their own imported gunmen might be stealing their cattle?" queried Mingo.

"Shore! Wilcox has got a bunch of renegades workin' for him. What more kin he expect?"

Mingo reflected quickly that Full-House Cox could hardly have been with the cattle thieves, since Carl Sands had heard him make threats in the Jinglebob the night before, very late, after the dance. He recalled the unkempt, bleary-eyed appearance of Monk Baizee, Tomlinson and Powder LaMotte, back at the Sagamore corrals.

"How'd this trouble start?" queried Mingo. "Over the boundary dispute?"

"Ye-es." Sagamore seemed to be holding something back. "But there was no excuse. The draw where them 'dobes rests was disputed ground for two years, in the courts yet. We patched it up, and while we both claimed it, we all stayed off, havin' plenty good grass from the rains. Then when our first man was shot—Slim Weeks—we chased Bar W hands from them 'Dobe Tombs. Then's when the war started, and that same night we lost a couple dozen steers. Our men seen them bein' drove north; we give pursuit, but lost 'em in the Santa Isabel and ain't found trace of them and others that has gone since, and them devils only a week before you come shot four cows with calf, not even to git the calves—the snakes!" His big brown eyes narrowed.

"Bar W coyotes will be watchin' our every move in Ranger. Expectin' us to even the score since they killed pore Flem Jones and cut down on Mister Haws. There'll be oiled guns aplenty in the Jinglebob. When they see Mingo here there'll be talk! And when they hear about me demandin' Bill Wilcox's arrest—" His eyes rolled meaningly. He had cut off with a glance at Prim; had said too much in the presence of the girl.

Mingo did not want to further alarm

Prim. He did not desire the arrest of Wilcox, knew that such a move would not be favored by the girl either, bringing the whole range war to a crisis.

"Mayhap it'll be a bad time now to ask Wilcox's arrest—with that raid last night," ventured the Texan.

"No!" exploded the cowman. "We ain't guilty. Sheriff Langley has held off long enough, with that warrant sworn, carryin' water on both shoulders. He's got to act!"

Argument was futile, the Texan realized. Ranger lay ahead, near at hand, a sprawling cow town that, so far as Mingo could see, was like a score of others he had known in the west. A few scattered dwellings were discernible, with a wide street on both sides of which were clustered false-fronted frame buildings, stores, an eating place or two, saloons, dancehalls, barber shop and the like. Lew Sagamore went ahead at a jog trot, with York, leaving Mingo with Prim, perhaps intentionally.

"I didn't know about this trouble," she said gravely. "I hope you won't be a party to any—gunplay."

"Don't reckon there'll be any trouble, Miss Prim," he said, lightly.

"You won't make any?"

"Not any."

She lowered her tone, scrutinizing him keenly. "Even if you are known in Texas as the tiger-man?"

"I never was quarrelsome." He tried to laugh off her fears.

Her large eyes were earnest. "Bar W is not behind this killing and rustling! But I cannot convince Dad of that." She drew her mount closer. "When Dad was telling how the trouble started, he left out something."

"Yes?"

"I do not like to say it, but you should know. It was over me—and Bob."

Mingo's face muscles twitched slightly; he let her volunteer further information. "Dad took a dislike to Bob Wilcox—would not give me any reason. He had words with Bob and told him never to talk to me again. He must have accused Bob of something—I don't know what—because his father took up the quarrel. From that time on the breech widened between the outfits, then the killing occurred and the cattle disappeared. It has been war ever since."

"You still think Bob Wilcox is—all right?" he asked her, probingly.

"Father has no right to interfere in such matters, even though I love him dearly. Perhaps I am obstinate, but I am more determined on marrying Bob now than ever."

"I admire your spunk," said the Texan cheerfully—more cheerfully than he felt.

They had reached the end of the long street of Ranger, where it melted into the open range. Lew Sagamore and York slowed, until the other two came up.

"Me and Pete will step in to see the sheriff. You join us there when yuh leave Prim, Mingo. How long will it take for shoppin', Prim?"

"About an hour."

"We'll meet you at the store, about that time or a little later. You wait—onless Mingo comes for yuh first." He and York went ahead, down the street.

The Texan and the girl proceeded. Just at the entrance to the general merchandise establishment, a newly painted building housing supplies from horse-feed to lingerie, Prim turned to Mingo.

"Don't look immediately, but the young man standing against the blue-front building is Bob Wilcox." She swung down lightly and entered the store. There had been no exchanges between Prim and the youth; she was obedient to her parent in avoiding him.

Casually Mingo turned when opportunity offered and cast his eyes on the son of his old-time friend. Bob Wilcox was perhaps twenty-five, blond, wore a gaudy purple shirt, and had a pointed nose and excessively thin, tight lips. He seemed to Mingo to be unduly flushed. Suddenly, he walked a step or two and swayed. The Texan, watching him, decided with astonishment that the young man was under the influence of liquor. In a moment he staggered to the entrance of the Jinglebob Saloon and swayed through the swinging doors.

"I'm glad Miss Prim didn't notice it," mused Mingo. "A fool, disgracing himself that-a-way, and him holding in his hand the heart of the finest girl in Arizona." His impulse was to follow Bob Wilcox and ad-

minister a lesson, a lecture or a beating, to bring him to his senses. His eyes went again to the saloon door, and at that moment he drew himself up with a jerk at sight of a face emerging from the Jinglebob. He did not notice the bulky frame, the garb, nor the gun that he wore—only the hairy countenance, the red nose, the close-set lynx eyes.

He recognized beyond doubt the face he had seen at 'Dobe Tombs just before he lost consciousness from the bullet wound. He knew now that he had seen that face not in a dream, but in reality.

The man had taken only a step or two, halted, stared toward the Texan, turned with a shrug and re-entered the Jinglebob. Mingo knotted his horse at the hitch rack, turned, and started across the street.

Part way across he caught sight of the waving arm of Lew Sagamore, who with York had dismounted before the rambling frame courthouse, at one end of which protruded the weather-beaten sign, "Sheriff's Office." A slim cowpuncher was conversing with them.

The Texan paused, then sauntered their way. When he joined them, Sagamore said, with suppressed excitement:

"I want yuh to hear this, Mingo. Say that again, will yuh, Red? This is Mister Haws, Mister Albers of Box Key, friend of Circle Dot."

Red Albers surveyed the newcomer with more than passing interest. "I've heered about yuh, Mister Haws. So's a lot of them others," crooking his thumb toward the saloon. "There's a hombre in there, name Full-House Cox—him that just stuck his head out the door—that's been makin' talk about cuttin' yuh down on sight. I reckon he just looked yuh over, and figured you might drift into the Jinglebob. He's been drinkin' some, and is a bad hombre, dangerous when he's lickered. Him and Bob Wilcox has been together all mornin'."

"You sure that was Full-House who came out there a minute ago, and went back in?"

"That was him. There's others in there, too, includin' his *amigo,* Baca, and Full-House says he wants to see yuh draw on him like you done on Tevizon."

The Texan moved away. "Where yuh goin'?" shot out Lew Sagamore, hastily.

"See you in a minute, after I see Mister Full-House."

CHAPTER X

Drunken Guns

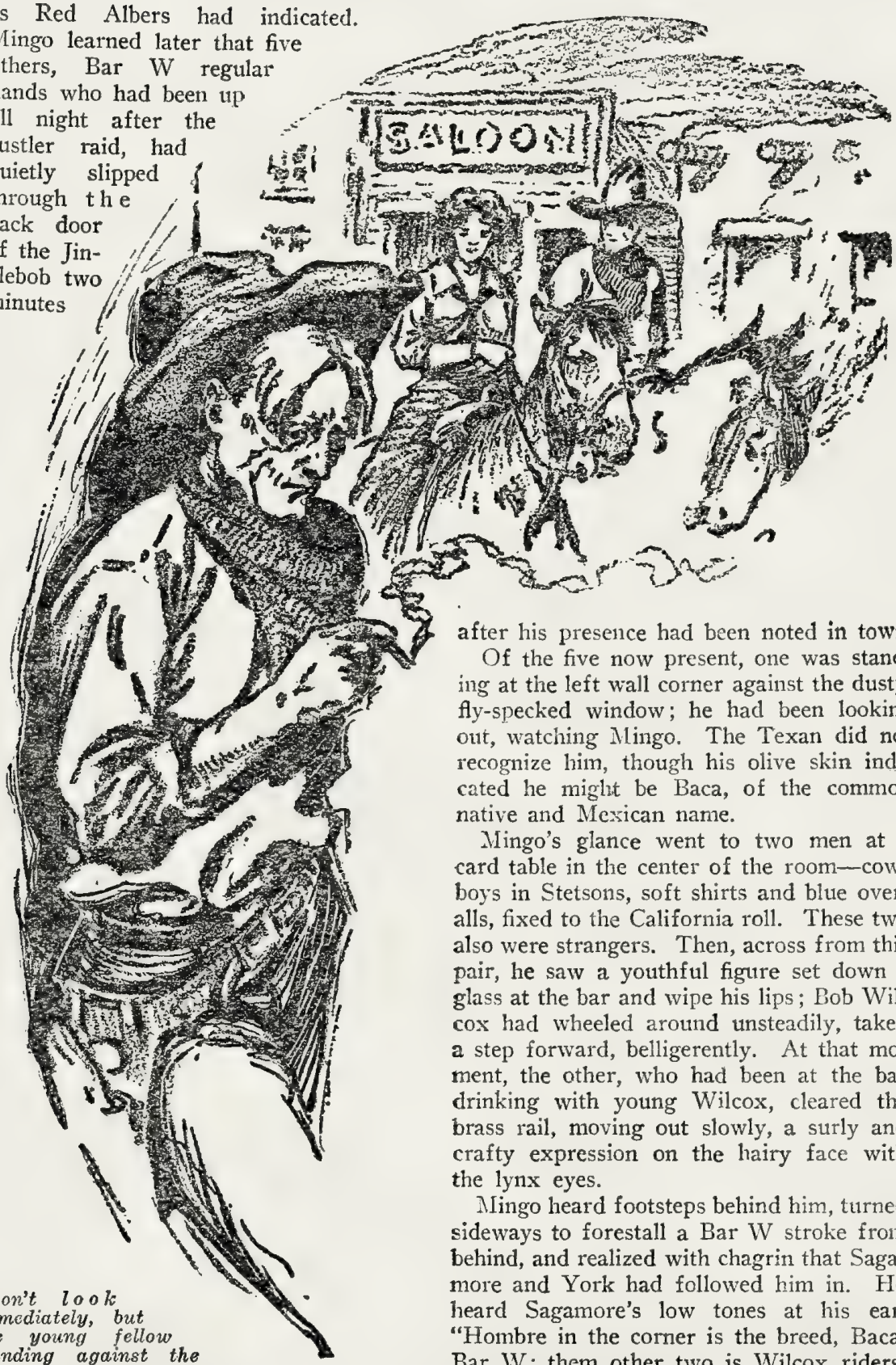
MINGO HAWS had made up his mind, swiftly, on a course of action. There was a time when the hot blood of his youth would have prompted him to settle the account quickly with one who had come so near to assassinating him—days when the tiger-man ruled supreme. But now he had no intention of merely baiting Full-House Cox to draw his gun. Cox was a Wilcox man, but not on this account did the Texan decide to spare the trigger on him. Cox had been drinking heavily, and while this might give him more reckless courage and make him more dangerous, El Tigre had never shot a drunken man. Besides, Mingo sought bigger game—Tevizon and the remainder of the outlaw six. Cox, drunk or sober, would be more valuable alive—if his tongue could be loosened. The Texan decided to loosen it.

For another thing, he was curious to see how Bob Wilcox was acting, what relation he bore to the company he was keeping. He would like to have got to the young man's ear and advised him to go home before, by any chance, Prim Sagamore saw him in his disgraceful condition.

As Mingo's hand touched the swinging doors of the Jinglebob, a side glance told him Sagamore and York were moving. He hoped they were not coming to lend a hand. That would defeat his object. Mingo had not even told Sagamore that Full-House was the owner of the assassin face he had seen at 'Dobe Tombs; that would only have verified the cowman's claim that Bar W was doing the killing. The Texan shoved in the door, entered, at a seemingly careless stride.

His eyes did not go directly to Full-House Cox, though he had that individual in oblique range; he took note of the others, and was ready for a "plant." The long barroom, cool in spite of the heat of the morning, harbored but five men aside from the bartender at that early hour—not so bad

as Red Albers had indicated. Mingo learned later that five others, Bar W regular hands who had been up all night after the rustler raid, had quietly slipped through the back door of the Jinglebob two minutes after his presence had been noted in town.



"Don't look immediately, but the young fellow standing against the blue front building is Bob Wilcox," said Prim.

Of the five now present, one was standing at the left wall corner against the dusty, fly-specked window; he had been looking out, watching Mingo. The Texan did not recognize him, though his olive skin indicated he might be Baca, of the common native and Mexican name.

Mingo's glance went to two men at a card table in the center of the room—cowboys in Stetsons, soft shirts and blue overalls, fixed to the California roll. These two also were strangers. Then, across from this pair, he saw a youthful figure set down a glass at the bar and wipe his lips; Bob Wilcox had wheeled around unsteadily, taken a step forward, belligerently. At that moment, the other, who had been at the bar drinking with young Wilcox, cleared the brass rail, moving out slowly, a surly and crafty expression on the hairy face with the lynx eyes.

Mingo heard footsteps behind him, turned sideways to forestall a Bar W stroke from behind, and realized with chagrin that Sagamore and York had followed him in. He heard Sagamore's low tones at his ear. "Hombre in the corner is the breed, Baca, Bar W; them other two is Wilcox riders, too. The kid is Wilcox's boy, and that

fuzz-face you recollect is the one you seen, Full-House Cox, Bar W killer. He's—"

"Go out!" snapped Mingo, incisively. "I'll handle it alone!"

The cowman and his foreman made no move. Mingo acted promptly, striding backwards, until he had reached the doors, pushed through them to the street. Sagamore and York followed quickly enough, now.

"Gosh, Mingo, that was a bad move. Full-House'll think—"

"Let 'em all think!" The Texan realized that his retreat would appear to the Jinglebob occupants as sign of a streak of yellow; he would correct that impression promptly, but in the meantime he must get rid of his too-willing aides.

"I'm going back in. Don't want you two along, or it'll look like Circle Dot has come to start a ruckus. I'd advise you not to demand Wilcox's arrest at this stage, but if you're sot on it, the quicker you get it over the better, while I interview that gent with the whiskers—"

"Full-House?" shot out Sagamore, quickly. "He ain't the one with the face you're lookin' for?"

"Can't say," evaded Mingo. "If you can trust me to go after the 'Dobe Tombs killers, you let me run this. That too much to ask?"

"No-o." The Circle Dot boss seemed doubtful, but his faith in the Texan was shown by his reluctant assent. "Me and Pete will go on to the sheriff's office, if yuh don't want us in there—"

"I don't." Mingo's tone was insistent; he was giving orders to his employer, instead of taking them. None the less, the Circle Dot men, looking puzzled, started back across the street.

The Texan turned and entered the Jinglebob a second time. As he stepped through the doors he saw the half-breed Baca at the window, making haste to step back—he had been staring through the pane, perhaps had signaled. Twenty feet away, at the bar, stood Bob Wilcox with Full-House Cox, eyes on the entrance.

Mingo saw that the two unnamed punchers at the card table had not moved. Their attitude indicated they meant no trouble, and probably were not gunmen. Mingo knew the two he would have to watch were Baca and Full-House Cox.

These two were widely separated. The Texan moved slightly to the left. Facing the bar, so that he could still observe any dubious move on the part of the half-breed, Mingo centered his gaze on the hairy individual. The fiery nose, beetle brows, the close-set yellowish eyes, focused on the new arrival, the sandy beard, reaching to the temples—all told Mingo he had made no mistake about the 'Dobe Tombs assassin.

Stifling the old tiger-man impulse of the law officer at memory of the shot that had nearly finished him, the former ranger waited, for it was their move, though he did not intend that it should remain so for long. They seemed in no hurry to contest his entry among them, and Mingo after a long moment moved to the back end of the bar, where Full-House and Baca would be in a line in front of him. Still they did not act. The barkeeper-proprietor, Hatch Lambert, fat, flabby-faced and aproned, left the glasses he had been wiping on the back-bar, and leaned forward, hands on the groove waiting. The newcomer ordered no drink. Bob Wilcox, supported by a hand on the top rail, was staring with fevered eyes on the intruder. The wait continued; the situation was demanding an explanation from the Texan. He made it:

"Understand there's a hombre in here name of Full-House Cox that's anxious to have a chat with Mingo Haws," he said blandly. He did not remove his gaze from the hairy one.

The Bar W man shrugged. "Didn't know I was. Who said so?"

"A sparrow told me."

Full-House started slightly. "That sparrer lied," he grunted, exchanging a swift glance with Baca.

"Like to see you a minute, in private, Cox," drawled Mingo, easily, gesturing to a booth behind them.

"You kin go to hell!" The lynx eyes filmed over. "Circle Dot kin state its message in public. Tell Lew Sagamore I said so!"

"In private," repeated the Texan, mean-

ingly, biding his time, knowing that whiskey had made the assassin reckless.

"You kin go to hell!" Full-House motioned to Lambert, called for another drink.

"The sparrow told me you wanted to try your gun hand." The words told that the Texan had decided to bring the matter to a close.

Full-House Cox stiffened, paused with the uplifted glass. His eyes drew from Mingo, suddenly evincing great interest in the Jinglebob entrance. This was not lost on the new rider. But if Full-House were expecting help, it had not yet come.

The bearded puncher's attitude changed abruptly. "That sparrer lied, too," he said, with a throaty laugh. He fidgeted at his neckerchief, to remove suspicion that he might use his gun hand. "I ain't seekin' trouble. Least of all with you, bein' new. Fact is, I kinda like yuh, hombre—a man that kin handle a pistol the way you done with that snake Tevizon. Even if yuh did make a mistake and jine Circle Dot. Hey, Hatch!" He motioned to the barkeeper, turned again to Mingo. "What'll yuh have, Mister Haws?"

"Not drinking, thanks," returned the Texan, coolly.

Full-House Cox shuffled nearer, along the bar-rail. "I'd like to see yuh jine Bill Wilcox's he-man riders, Mister Haws. From what I've heered tell of yuh, Bill will be pleased to have yuh!" He extended a big hairy paw. Mingo ignored the proffer, turned aside.

As he altered position, ostensibly off guard—an old trick of his ranger days—he saw the killer's hand dart toward his holster. Mingo was expecting some such treachery, nor was he wholly unprepared for the scene at the front end of the bar, by the window. The half-breed Baca was darting outward, stabbing for his gun.

The Texan's draw, a mere flicker of motion, had been swift enough to halt the hand of Full-House in its relatively awkward, blundering course; the assassin's fingers opened, claw-like, at his sides; he bent, froze, as though to ward off the blow. Mingo's weapon tilted slightly, sidewise, and blazed, past Full-House, toward the menacing figure of Baca. The jaw of El Tigre was outthrust, neck muscles corded, for the breed had risked the handle and full hip draw, counting on Mingo's double target. Baca's slanting big forty-five was a bull's-eye—child's play for one who could cut the red from the ace-of-diamonds at that twenty feet. It ripped back against the pane noiselessly in the roar and the trailing tinkle of broken glass. Baca's hand was drawn back as from a serpent's sting with no sign of red, as Mingo, with ready left, lifted the pistol of Full-House from its sheath.

"In private," murmured Mingo grimly, "I want to see you, Cox!" As he uttered the words, the doors swung in enough to admit a youthful-looking cowboy's face. "Lew's aimin' to have Bill Wilcox arrested! Quit yore fool shootin', Full-House—" It revealed that Full-House, "lickered up," had been doing some promiscuous practicing that morning at several places about town, Mingo learned afterwards.

The messenger had cut short, stared, as he saw the Texan. His face withdrew quickly, and the two inoffensive card players, who had risen, backed out of the door. Baca withdrew with them. Mingo did not try to hold them, for reasons of his own.

"Now, Cox, get in there!" Mingo drove him to the open door of the nearest booth. Bob Wilcox alone remained in the saloon with Hatch Lambert, the youth supporting himself by the bar, which told the Texan he must be very drunk indeed. Inside the little room, Mingo stepped to the rear wall facing the door, and commanded Full-House to shut it.

"Cox, you're better with the rifle. Your shot down at 'Dobe Tombs put me on my back, but it didn't kill me, quite. Unbuckle that holster belt!"

Full-House's lynx eyes popped at the accusation. "Honest, Mr. Haws," he muttered, hoarsely, fingers at the buckle. "What's that fer?"

"Lay it down on the table; that's it!" Mingo leaned forward, shoved the confiscated six-shooter back into its sheath. "Now buckle it on, and be careful where your fingers work!" Mingo holstered his own weapon. "Now I'll ask you to draw, so I can pay you off for that shot you fired

in hiding, since you're hankering for a chance to show me your draw—"

"I ain't!" The hairy face twitched. "I never said I could beat yuh to the draw, Mr. Haws. I—"

"Go for your gun, Cox—or tell me the names of the other five that are mixed up in those 'Dobe Tombs murders. Pronto!"

Full-House swallowed.

"The Sparrow told me you wanted to try your gun hand."

"Honest, Mr. Haws, I ain't in any killin's—"

"You're lying! I'll help you name 'em — Tevizon, Cox, Baca — and who's the other three? Say it, or go for your gun, if you don't want me to drill you where you stand!"

"I'll tell!" Full-House threw out his hands, in resignation. "If you let me off easy. They're aimin' to git you down to the Tombs agin, and—"

The Texan's hand flashed to his gun, but not at the words of the hairy assassin. His weapon covered the door; only an unexplainable impulse withheld pressure on the trigger. The door had opened a matter of inches and a pistol barrel was in the opening, muzzle on the Van Horn man, a pair of eyes behind it. As the aperture widened, Mingo saw the flushed countenance of Bob Wilcox.

"No," the young man grunted, in thick voice, "you won't tell him anything, Full-House." He laughed bitterly, and Mingo saw that he was not too drunk to think clearly. "Today we clean up Circle Dot and their hired gunmen after that raid, and we might as well start in right now!"

He flung back the door full, lunged uncertainly on his legs in the entrance. "I watched you riding into town with Miss Prim, you damned interloper! Coming here to steal a man's girl, are you? I'll teach you!" His thin lips twitched; his flushed eyelids narrowed over blazing eyeballs. "You can't run any blazer on me, hombre! I've heard a lot about you, ever since you've been hanging around the Sagamore place, you and Prim with your heads together, morning, noon and night!"

El Tigre might have beaten him still, but he dared not shoot a drunken man—and Bob Wilcox's gun was in front of him, where it could not be hammered from his hand with a bullet without killing him. Yet if he did not act, Full-House Cox, now armed again, would find his opportunity. In the midst of these swift reflections the open

door revealed the darting figure of a little man with a flat nose and chin-strap, clearing the main entrance into the Jinglebob.

Tevizon had come, heeled and gun in hand; and the Texan recalled how Full-House had watched the front door a few minutes before, expecting him. Tevizon was late, but it was a plant, and Fate had given the little outlaw a better setting than he would have had earlier, through the rash action of Bob Wilcox—innocent of the conspiracy of Tevizon, Baca and Full-House, Mingo believed.

The border killer had fought Full-House Cox when he had first come to town, Sagamore had said, winning his job on the Circle Dot. But they were no longer foes, if they had ever been. Tevizon's deep-set, reptilian eyes had swept the saloon and went to the open booth. His gun tilted, instantly.

CHAPTER XI

Disarmed—Temporarily

THERE was no choice; Mingo drew. Ignoring the peril of Full-House Cox, in the narrow booth to left of him, and the drink-inflamed, jealousy-aroused young Wilcox in the center of the doorway, the Texan faced the greater menace of Tevizon, whose left hand had whipped out its weapon to the accompaniment of his right at sight of the man he sought. Guns would have spoken then but for the swaying figure of Bob Wilcox, blundering back a step, immediately in the doorway. Mingo realized he was screened by the boy's body, and Tevizon, for the instant, was out of range, except for feet and one arm, moving toward the booth.

In the brief period of Tevizon's sudden appearance in the Jinglebob, the significance of the act was not lost upon Mingo Haws. Tevizon, although of the Circle Dot, had come to lend a hand to Full-House Cox and Baca, of the Bar W. The Jinglebob, he knew, had never been a hangout of the Circle Dot, but of the Wilcox outfit. The lines that had been drawn since the feud were fast disintegrating; the renegades of both outfits were uniting. Prim was right. That introductory fight between Tevizon and Cox was *staged.*

Sight of Mingo's drawn forty-five did not tame the angry, unreasonable Bob Wilcox; his own gun remained on the Texan, menacingly, and Mingo dared not shoot him. Full-House Cox stood with furtive eyes on his face, his hairy right paw creeping toward his holster, inch by inch, ready for the stab. Mingo was not blind to that fact, but his eyes watched the space of light at the left of Wilcox; Tevizson's anatomy was partly visible, but in no vital spot, as he crouched forward. Mingo shot out crisp words:

"I'll kill you, Cox, if your hand moves an inch!" He knew how futile it would be to argue with jealous, drink-blinded young Wilcox, but he risked to say: "You're wrong, Bob, about me trying to take your girl—"

"You lie! Drop that gun, or I'll plug you! Drop it!" Bob's six-shooter muzzle jabbed toward the Texan like a serpent's head. Mingo realized the danger, what whiskey would do if he did not obey, yet he dared not drop his gun, dared not use it. The boots of Tevizon told that the little gunman was within ten feet, behind Bob.

"Drop it!" The boy's hand hardened, knuckles struck out, as he tightened on the rubber stocks. Mingo looked past him, shot out sharp, electric words:

"Don't do it, Tevizon! If you shoot him, I'll drop you, sure!" It was a ruse that had worked before.

Bob Wilcox lurched, turned awkwardly, and staggered back, his inflamed eyes wide, at last nearly sober. His gun circled around to face the new foe. That fact prevented the play of pistols between the flat-nosed puncher and Mingo Haws, for Tevizon had halted a moment, confused at the new attack. The Texan's left arm swept upward; Bob's Colt jerked away. Tevizon was facing the blue-steel barrel of the Texan's forty-five.

The little gunman's jaw tightened on the chin strap; his deep-set, repellent orbs blinked in slow comprehension; his fingers released the trailing six-shooters and they slid to the floor. Mingo's gun went to Full-House, and the renegade found himself disarmed.

"Now I want to have a talk with you two!" Mingo motioned Tevizon within the

booth, beside Full-House. "Bob, here's your gun." He slid it to him. "You better go home pronto." He drew the door behind the now thoroughly sobered, but mystified son of his old friend. He gave his attention to the hairy one and the little gunman of the flat nose.

"Trick Tyrone is wanted for a bunch of murders," he said evenly, eyes on Tevizon.

The sunken orbs glowered deeply, but there was no hint of panic in the hard face at this veiled accusation that Tevizon was the border killer. "What's that got to do with me?" growled the disarmed puncher, his warty lips curling down.

"Might have something to do, Tevizon! I reckon you and your *amigo* here are through, so far as 'Dobe Tombs is concerned—"

The words were cut with a roar and splintered wood. Mingo's six-shooter leaped toward the door through which the shot had bored a shattered hole in the flimsy wood. An instant before, the Texan had thought he heard a soft scraping of boots outside the booth. He did not wait for a second shot, but fired at the spot from whence the first shot had come. Darting forward, he kicked open the door, in time to see the fleeing figure of a man vanishing through the front swing doors. He heard Full-House's low whisper, "Baca!"

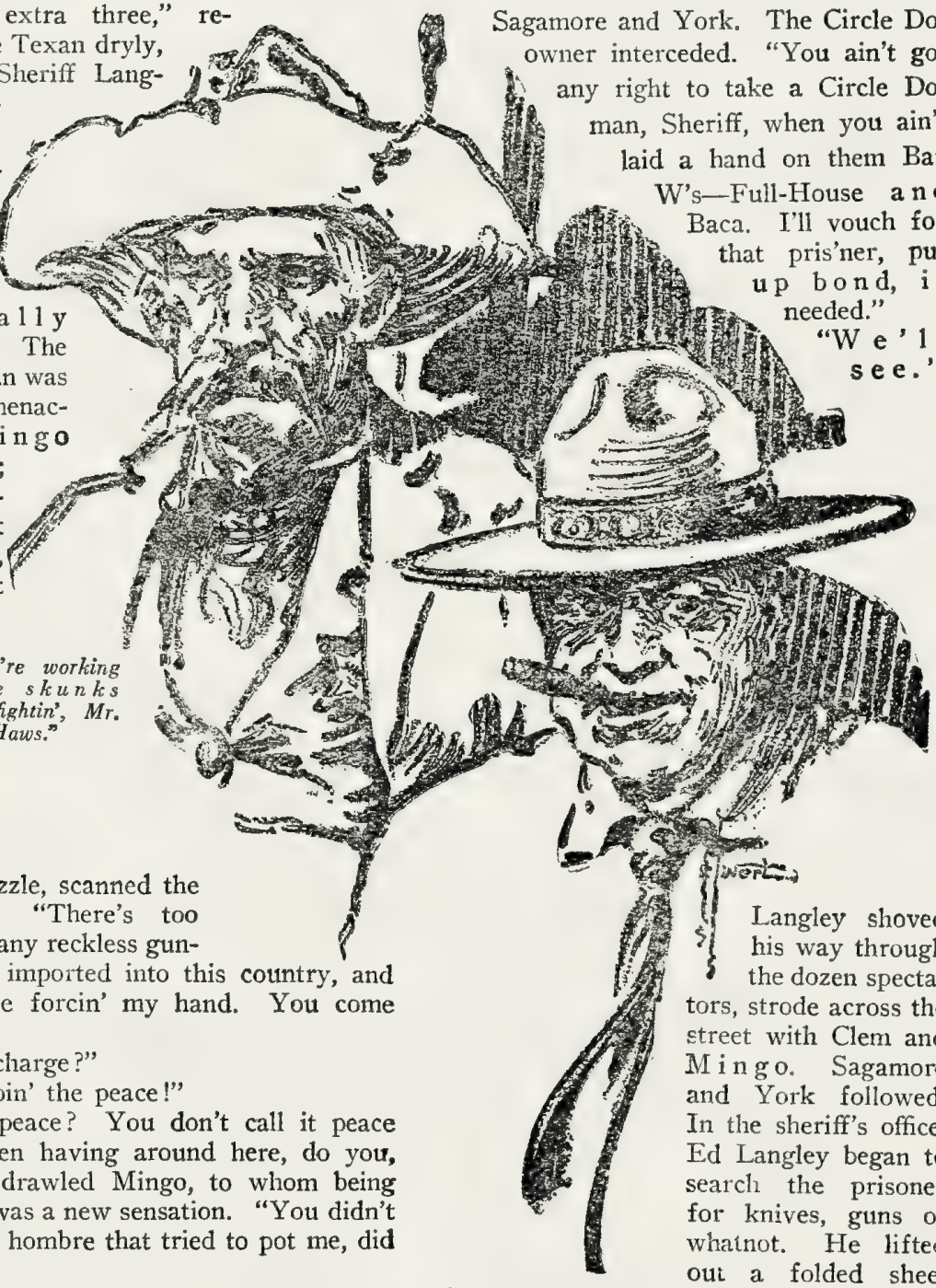
"Trick Tyrone is wanted for a bunch of murders," he said evenly, eyes on Tevizon.

Mingo did not follow; he decided to leave the booth door open, risking Hatch Lambert's none too trustworthy eyes and ears. At that moment two burly figures stamped into the saloon—strangers to Mingo. On the forward one's shirt the Texan saw a sheriff's star. That worthy strode rapidly toward the booth, his companion at his elbow. Mingo slowly sheathed his gun.

"You're under arrest," barked the sheriff, eyes taking in the situation. His big Colt was in his hand. "Take his guns, Clem! This damned promiskerous shootin' has got to stop!"

"Better not take *my* gun; you're welcome to these extra three," remarked the Texan dryly, as Clem, Sheriff Langley's deputy, followed orders.

"Take 'em all, Clem, especially *that* one!" The sheriff's gun was elevated menacingly. Mingo yielded it; Clem handed it back to Langley, who smelt of the muzzle, scanned the chambers. "There's too damned many reckless gunmen bein' imported into this country, and citizens are forcin' my hand. You come with me!"



"So yo're working for the skunks we're fightin', Mr. Haws."

"What charge?"

"Disturbin' the peace!"

"What peace? You don't call it peace they've been having around here, do you, Sheriff?" drawled Mingo, to whom being disarmed was a new sensation. "You didn't arrest that hombre that tried to pot me, did you?"

"We'll git him!" snapped Langley, whose burly, ferocious mien belied the vacillating nature of the man. A crowd was now beginning to congregate, with this sudden display of authority on the part of the sheriff; the onlookers emboldened him. He produced handcuffs. "Come, or I'll snap 'em on!"

"I'll be peaceable as a lamb!" Grinning, the Texan followed the two out, to meet Sagamore and York. The Circle Dot owner interceded. "You ain't got any right to take a Circle Dot man, Sheriff, when you ain't laid a hand on them Bar W's—Full-House and Baca. I'll vouch for that pris'ner, put up bond, if needed."

"We'll see."

Langley shoved his way through the dozen spectators, strode across the street with Clem and Mingo. Sagamore and York followed. In the sheriff's office, Ed Langley began to search the prisoner for knives, guns or whatnot. He lifted out a folded sheet of paper from Mingo's shirt pocket.

"I'll trouble you not to take that!" said the Texan, quietly. "It's private."

"Is it? Mebbee it'll show something about what you gunmen are doin' around here!" He jerked it open. Mingo with a long reach seized it, tore it into a dozen pieces.

"Yo're defyin' the law!" roared the sher-

iff. "Gather up them pieces, Clem, and patch 'em together!"

"Now, lookee here!" It was Lew Sagamore who spoke, placing an easy hand on the sheriff. "This man is my friend; he ain't a trouble-maker; he's working to find out who done them murders, the same as you are doin'. You're hatchin' trouble, Sheriff, if yo're goin' to continue to discriminate against Circle Dot!"

"Who's discriminatin'?"

"You are. You haven't given an answer yet about servin' that warrant on Wilcox."

"I ain't servin' the warrant you ask," retorted the sheriff, gruffly, "even if you do blame me for bein' a Wilcox man. Bill accuses me of bein' a Circle Dot partisan! Read this." He yanked out a sheet of paper. "It's a warrant for *yore* arrest, signed by Bill Wilcox!"

While Sagamore, astonished, scanned the contents, the sheriff resumed, coolly. "Shows there's two sides to this ruckus. Fact is, I've had a warrant for yore arrest longer'n you swore out the one for Bill. I'm servin' neither. This ain't the way to hold down a job as sheriff, and I don't aim to git defeated next election, neither!" He wagged his head after this frank exposition of his stand. "Things is in bad enough shape, now, with me not even able to git up a posse, without including both Circle Dot and Bar W, and them two won't hitch." He eyed his deputy. "What's it say, Clem!"

Clem had finished with a paste bottle, and his eyes indicated a big discovery. He read aloud the letter from Bill Wilcox, revealing Mingo's double role of friend of Bill Wilcox and containing the reference to "El Tigre" which was not lost on Sheriff Langley, though Lew Sagamore had never heard the name. But Sagamore's face darkened swiftly.

"So yo're workin' for the skunks we're fightin', Mister Haws," he intoned slowly, "while you was pretendin' to be a loyal friend of Circle Dot. And us harborin' a spy, for more'n two weeks, and not knowin' a thing about it." The brown eyes snapped in anger. "I'm glad we found it out—before it's too late!"

CHAPTER XII

A Busy Night Ahead

LEW SAGAMORE paused, and for a time the two faced each other unspeaking. The Circle Dot owner made no mention of the hospitality his household had shown, the nursing of the wounded man, doctor bill and board, on full pay as a rider, which made Mingo think more of him, though he had expected to settle that bill in full.

"It's true I came here to lend a hand for Bill Wilcox," answered the Texan, quietly. "When I joined Circle Dot I thought it was a den of thieves. I've found out differently. But there are thieves among you—like Tevizon and some more—and killers. For your own sake, Mr. Sagamore, I'd advise you not to trust Tevizon out of your sight—and watch those other three, Monk Baizee, Tomlinson and LaMotte. Part of their band parades under Bar W banner, too—men like Full-House Cox and Baca. I'm through with Circle Dot, I reckon. Your kindness I can't repay, but I'll write you a check for the doctor's bill, and board, now, the same time I put up bond to keep peace with the sheriff here."

"I don't want yore money!" flung back Sagamore, angrily. "Yo're not a cowpuncher, but a hired gunman, usin' Wilcox money—and Circle Dot don't want it. Yo're through—"

"Before you pass judgment, Mr. Sagamore, I'll say I came to Hidden Valley on a special mission—at Bill Wilcox's call, it's true—to find a man named Trick Tyrone—mentioned in that private letter you heard read.

"When I saw the situation at 'Dobe Tombs, and was shot, I made myself a promise—to run down that band of killers there, no matter whether they belonged to Bar W or Circle Dot. I aim to do it. If I know anything, neither Wilcox nor Sagamore is guilty of stealing or killings—which I think I can prove, in a day, a week, or a month. I'm through, but I only want to repeat my warning to you to watch those I named, especially Tevizon."

Sagamore's great head was elevated in defiance. "Yore tongue is oily; if it wasn't you wouldn't 'a' been picked by Wilcox to

act as spy on Circle Dot. I cain't trust a man that'll deceive the way you done. I savvy some things now—why you pulled yore gun on Tevizon, right off. Tev is the biggest foe Bill Wilcox has to contend with—and he knows it. Yore game was long-sighted, to pick a quarrel with my best men, and start a ruckus that would remove 'em from Circle Dot. What's the use talkin'? We're through." His big brown eyes narrowed. "I ain't a match for you with guns—but I got one that is, Tevizon, in a fair, square fight. I'll trouble yuh for that hoss yo're ridin', and 'll be obliged if yuh walk up there and take off yore saddle and bridle—"

Prim Sagamore was on the steps of the sheriff's office. "Aren't you men ready?" she called reprovingly. "Come, Mr. Haws; we'll let Daddy finish his business with the sheriff!" Her cheeks were flushed with the heat of the morning; her eyes bright and eager. Lew Sagamore strode to her.

"Mister Haws is through with Circle Dot," he said, sourly. "We're ready," motioning to Pete York. As Prim turned with them she gave the Texan a puzzled, troubled look, which Mingo would have given much to answer. He wondered if he would see her again or be of further service to her in restoring understanding between the Circle Dot and Bar W, so that she and Bob Wilcox might be friends—and more—again.

At that moment in a back room in the Jinglebob saloon, two figures sat opposite each other at a liquor-stained oil-clothed table, a whiskey bottle between them. One, of hairy mien and cold lynx eyes, was leaning forward, listening attentively to his companion, of the flat-nose and ever-present chin-strap.

"Trick Tyrone, Trick Tyrone," the little man was repeating, in low hoarse tones. "Did you hear him say it, Full-House? Whoever that devil is, he knows, Full-House, *he knows!*"

"And he's a gun-fighter!"

"A gun-fighter—and the luckiest coyote on two laigs. There was never a man in Arizona could do what he done to me, Full-House, twict over—you know it! I kin beat him—beat him—and I will! But it ain't safe, Full-House, to pull this play again—if we're goin' to make the big cut tonight! We ain't got time!' '

"No, but that devil is wise—he's got to go, before we kin feel safe on the big play, Tev—you know he has!"

"I know it! Full-House, we got to git that bird down at 'Dobe Tombs, where there won't be no slip-up. We got to git him down there, alone, this afternoon, before we're ready for them two herds—"

"Two herds?" Cox's mouth opened wide.

"Yeah." Tevizon grinned, for the first time that day. "I talked to Gruber, one them new men brung in by yore boss. Wilcox trusts that bunch. Gruber will swing them boys in on the deal, and you kin lead 'em. Me and the rest will correll the herd at Chavez—Circle Dot brand. You and Gruber will git the new Wilcox bunch to clean Bill. But first I got to go to 'Dobe Tombs, to handle this thing with that Tehanner—alone. Now let me think. How'n hell kin we fix it to bring Mister Haws down to 'Dobe Tombs to git his big medicine?" He gulped down a hasty drink, frowned in deep thought.

"Without interferin' with the trick tonight—"

"Shore! Now, if we could corral that filly—down there—

"Prim! He's dead gone on her, and if—"

"I got it, dang me, I got it! If we could git that skirt down there, th' Sagamore bunch would burn leather streakin' to the 'Dobes—and if we-all git Bob Wilcox there, Bar W would come ridin'. Then, while both bunches are fightin' it out—blamin' each other—we would grab off that Chavez herd, and the Bar W bunch. But we got to git Haws down there, first, before the others finds it out. Now listen!" He bent forward, and his deep set, tiny black eyes gleamed avidly.

"To-night you tip off Wilcox that me and Powder and Tomlinson and Monk was seen goin' to the Tombs, and a minute later Baca comes in with the news we've got Bob down there. That'll fetch the Bar W. At the same time, Powder will whisper in Sagamore's ear that you and Baca was seen in the 'Dobes, and purty soon the news comes

from Tomlinson that Prim is taken down there! That'll give us a clear range fer the drive to the Santa Isabel, up Cow-Thief. Lew's even made us his herd-guard!" He chuckled deeply.

"We'll git to his ear first of all! I'll send word to Prim that Bob is waitin' for her down at the forks. She'll go; and the crowd will be too busy with that herd to see us work. You send word to Bob that Prim is waitin' at the same place. He'll come! Then we'll run 'em both in."

"Tev, yo're smart!" Cox gazed on him in wonder.

"And Tomlinson or Monk will slip word to Mister Haws first thing that Prim's down there, waitin' fer him till he's out of reach of the bunch here. We'll kill two sets of buzzards with one play!"

They finished the bottle over it.

CHAPTER XIII

In the Saddle

MINGO HAWS was to do a lot of riding the remainder of that day, even though he surrendered the horse he had been using to Lew Sagamore. He hired another, from the stables in Ranger, and made ready to travel to the Bar W, for the long-delayed meeting with Bill Wilcox. Sheriff Langley, patting a fat pocket bulging with cigars, had quietly announced to Mingo that he had changed his mind about holding him. That torn letter had been exceedingly enlightening.

"El Tigre, heh?" the sheriff had inquired, craftily. "What's Bill Wilcox mean by that, Mister Haws?"

"You'll have to ask *him.*"

"H—m! Thought I had seen yore face somewhere before, hombre, when I was down on the Rio Grande!" He grinned knowingly.

"There's nothing strange about that. I was there."

"You ain't denyin' it, are yuh, Mister Haws? And you the tiger-man that Tevizon has been boastin' private, among his *amigos,* that he killed! No wonder there wasn't any extradition papers when I tried for 'em, for a Haws murder, under the name of Tevizon. So you got it doped that Tev is Trick Tyrone, heh? If I pitch in with yuh, will yuh split? Have a *real* smoke," offering a huge black Mexican cigar.

Mingo glared. "What do you mean—split?"

"I reckon that five thousand is still on Trick Tyrone's head, ain't it?"

"I don't know that it is. Now I'll talk, Sheriff. Maybe I'm an officer—maybe not. Maybe Tevizon is Tyrone—maybe not. If he is, he's your meat. But I wouldn't count on doing my duty arresting an outlaw as well known as Trick Tyrone, wanted for crimes in Arizona as well as Texas, because of the reward, Sheriff, if I was you. I'd go get him."

"Tom Langley never interferes in another man's play, Mister Haws. I'll lend a hand, if you say the word, and it ain't any more than fair that the reward splits. If you figure on goin' it alone, cuttin' me out, mayhap yuh won't have the easy time yuh expect, Texas!"

"You go get him, if you *know.* He's your game." Mingo sauntered out of the dusty office, leaving the sheriff to meditate. From his first sight of Langley, Mingo had been unable to say whether the officer was one to be trusted or not. He had encountered vacillating sheriffs before who were strictly neutral in times of trouble—for a reason.

The most urgent job on hand now was to see Bill Wilcox, to post him about the enemies in his own camp, and learn anything about the 'Dobe Tombs murders that his old friend knew. To date Mingo realized he had heard only one side—that of Lew Sagamore.

The day was yet early—10 o'clock of a scorching hot morning—when the Texan, a bite to eat at Chink Yin's restaurant, took the saddle for Bar W, eight miles from Ranger, due east, where Hidden Valley met the foothills of the lower Santa Isabel range. His horse, a wiry dun-white pinto, was fresh, and Mingo counted on making the distance within the hour. The trail was deserted; the Texan did not know what had become of Bob Wilcox, whether he had gone home or remained in town, but he hoped he might run into him, to tell him some things. There was a chance he might en-

counter Full-House Cox or Baca at the Wilcox place; if so, he would be ready.

Half way out, he passed a rider coming in. The puncher exchanged a civil nod, but when the first rise had been passed and Mingo turned he saw the rider streaking back toward the Bar W, at a tangent.

"Thought so," grinned Mingo. "He'll break the news about me." The Texan knew he had been marked as the latest Circle Dot gun-fighter; it was yet too early for the news to have traveled about his discharge by Sagamore.

His guess about the Bar W rider was correct, for when he rode up to the Wilcox house he found a half dozen cow hands standing about awaiting his arrival. Some of these had undoubtedly chased the raiders the night before, though Mingo had seen none of them in the Jinglebob. They were a silent, efficient-looking lot, and one of their number, clean-shaven and square-jawed, strode forward as the newcomer dismounted.

"We ain't takin' on any hands, stranger," he said, shortly.

"Where'll I find Mr. Wilcox?"

"I'll take any message to him. What's yore name?"

"Haws."

The spokesman, whom Mingo learned later was Wilcox's foreman, Getty, an able and fearless cowman, walked toward the house, to a corner room whose door was dropped open. A horse was standing by the gallery, and Mingo heard the murmur of voices within. A moment later the rotund figure of cherub-faced Bill Wilcox appeared at the door.

There was no look of recognition, no welcome from the Texan's old friend. Wilcox spoke to the message-bearer, and the latter motioned Mingo toward the house. At that juncture a cowboy emerged and took the saddle of the waiting horse.

Bill Wilcox motioned the Texan within, as though he were a complete stranger. But once in the room, the Bar W man's broad face lighted, blue eyes twinkling, as he reached forth both hands.

"Doggone my hide! How are yuh, anyhow, after bein' shot by those Sagamore snakes! Couldn't get over to see yuh—yuh know why! Didn't want to let on to them outside, just now, that I ever knowed yuh, Mingo! Yore trip here in the middle of day is bound to cause talk, as it is—mebbe hurt what yo're doin' at Circle Dot. What brung yuh? But before yuh say it, I just got a pack of excitin' news. You notice that rider that just left?"

Mingo nodded, abstractedly, while he surveyed his friend, a florid, good-natured cowman of forty odd who in the seven years since Mingo had seen him had changed considerably as to size, and he always was big. Now he was immense, and must have cut a near ludicrous figure in the saddle. Yet his outdoor life had hardened him, so that he was not so rotund about the middle as he would otherwise have been. But Bill Wilcox was the same, inwardly, the Van Horn visitor reflected—big-hearted, trusting, generous, ready to fight a foe or help a friend; his kindly face and eyes revealed the fact. Now he chuckled.

"Danged glad yuh come, now, anyhow, 'spite of what those boys have to say about Circle Dot gunman payin' calls!" His eyes sobered. "I ain't told you the news that rider brung. I've had him layin' out on the ridge watchin' since that raid last night—Circle Dot thieves tried to run off a bunch of my steers last night—he was on guard, and about an hour ago saw a Sagamore pair ridin' down to the 'Dobes. One of 'em took both hosses back leavin' the other hombre in one those shacks!"

The Texan forgot many of the things he wanted to say in greeting. "That's important," he affirmed grimly. "You sure it was Circle Dot?"

"Shore! Who else? He saw the brand of their hosses, and recognized the one that stayed. If I ain't mistaken—" He lowered his voice. "—it was Trick Tyrone himself!"

"Meaning—?"

"You ain't been at Sagamore's house all this time without findin' out, Mingo! The skunk that's paradin' under the name of Tevizon!"

The Texan's light eyes flickered. "You're right, Bill, about Tevizon, I reckon. So he's gone down to the 'dobes alone, eh? What were you planning to do?"

"Go get him! Minute you come in, I

was layin' plans. Now, yo're here, yuh might as well join us, and we'll smoke out that killer pronto, and he won't have a chance to use either a rifle or a six-gun on yuh again, Mingo!"

"Listen, Bill." The Texan swung into a chair, motioned the other down. "I've got a lot to say—I'll talk fast. First place, I'm not with Circle Dot any more—Sagamore found out. Took my horse. I figured it was time to come and see what you know. Don't expect to ride for Bar W, because of reasons of my own. I'll ride free. Got to work between here and Circle Dot, and at 'Dobe Tombs, to get those killers. I've got 'em spotted. Some of 'em are your men—"

"My men!" Bill Wilcox was out of the chair, eyes wide, lips tightening. "Yo're loco—"

"I saw the hombre that shot me, Bill. Full-House Cox!"

"It's a—! Beg your pardon Mingo. What makes yuh think any fool thing like that?"

"Saw him—when he dragged me in, just before I went out. There was a chance his pal fired the shot—Baca—but I'm ninety-nine per cent. sure it was Cox—"

"Baca!" barked the cowman. "Yo're wrong, Mingo—wrong. *I sent those two down to the 'dobes that m o r n i n' myself.*"

"Mebbeso. Those two have been playing you, Bill—the same as Tevizon and his *amigos* have been playing Circle Dot. I've found out that neither Sagamore nor his regular hands have been mixed up in these killings and stealing, but a bunch of renegades imported here by both outfits. They're playing a long game, at those 'dobes—don't know exactly what, unless it's to run off both your herds, but—"

"Yo're dreamin', Mingo, dreamin'! Full-House ain't an importee—neither's Baca. They've been here for years. As good men as we've got. I sent 'em down to the Tombs that mornin' to try to run out those killers. Chances are they got there, Mingo, right after you was shot, and that's how you saw Full-House."

Mingo Haws smiled sourly. "Not any. They worked with Tevizon this mornin' at the Jinglebob, Bill—and tried to kill me. You don't know that little game—"

Wilcox raised a hand. "I know somethin' about it. Bob was here a half an hour ago. He told me about that ruckus. Full-House didn't know you was a friend of his boss, workin' on Circle Dot under cover. Neither'd Baca. Neither'd Bob, for that matter. I kept that dark, Mingo—except I had to tell Carl Sands because I couldn't meet yuh with those instructions, and Carl is a friend. Full-House and Baca might have tried to get yuh, true enough, you bein' a Circle Dot gunman. The fools—I'd have given 'em hell if I'd knowed it. Bob told me you run a blazer on him." Bill Wilcox chuckled. "Fool kid—he's all broke up over the Sagamore girl—been drinkin' heavy. I'm glad he didn't make yuh trouble, Mingo. Bob is sore at you—I'll tell him about the play soon's it's safe. Sore because he thinks you've been shinin' up to that girl. Dang it! So yo're out with Sagamore. And was adopted by him, taken right into the family! Reports sayin' you was likely to marry Lew's daughter, even!" His chuckle died, and a slight frown broke on the cherubic countenance. "There ain't any truth in that—yore payin' attentions to Prim Sagamore, Mingo? I thought not." His face lightened. "Bob was drinkin'! How in mischief did Lew find out who you was?"

"He didn't," evaded Mingo, resolved to hold silence about the letter falling into the sheriff's hands. Bill Wilcox was still blinded by the feud spirit. The cowman reviewed the war, hastily.

"And so far as yore dopin' it out that *my* men have been mixed in these killin's, Mingo, yo're dead wrong. Stick here a week, ride with us, and you'll have yore eyes opened."

"I don't reckon it'll take a week," said the Texan, blandly. "If Tevizon's down there now, things will likely happen *today*. I'll ride along—no time to lose."

"Shore—that fits in—except we'll go 'long!" Bill Wilcox strode toward the door, raising his voice for Getty. Mingo halted him.

"You know there's no use in a bunch going to the draw, Bill, don't you? It's been tried a dozen times."

"Yuh mean—?" Wilcox stared, wavered; brushed Getty back from the door when he came.

"I'm going down there, Bill, alone. If I don't get him, bring your bunch. If you don't hear from me in a couple hours you come. That fair?"

Bill Wilcox reluctantly admitted that it was. Mingo rode again, toward the Tombs.

CHAPTER XIV

Prisoners

MINGO HAWS pressed his dun-and-white pinto to the utmost, toward the two 'dobe shacks, wholly unconscious that he was doing what Tevizon had laid careful plans to have him do—plans that were unnecessary. Bill Wilcox's lone cowboy watch had been the agency to direct the Texan's trail toward 'Dobe Tombs, unknown to the flat-nosed gunman. Tevizon would have been spared a lot of needless thinking had he been aware of the part Fate was playing in his deeply-contrived arrangements.

The Van Horn cattleman, now a free-lance man-hunter unattached either to the Wilcox or Sagamore outfits, rode at a gallop for two miles, through the galleta and grama grass range of the low lomas, then drew into an easier lope for a breathing spell, and after another mile pressed into the faster gait. He avoided the Ranger trail, cutting directly northwest toward 'Dobe Tombs draw, east of the pebble buttes. He wanted to see as few riders of either outfit as possible—Bar W men did not know his relation to their boss, and Circle Dot would by this time hear of his breach with Sagamore. Mingo did not fear trouble, but there was no time for exchanges or challenges of any kind.

His hurry to reach the 'dobes in the draw was prompted by knowledge that Bill Wilcox might at any time change his mind and, with the best of intentions, send help. Mingo did not want interference that might force Tevizon to remain in hiding; besides, there was danger of a battle between the outfits if Wilcox sent a force of men. The Texan did not know how long he would have to play hide-and-seek with Tevizon; he was determined to ferret out the secret of the 'Dobe Tombs mystery, and this could only be done by playing a lone hand.

The draw lay eleven miles from the Wilcox home buildings, and after eight miles of going, the pinto was in a lather. Mingo eased him off a bit and at that moment sighted a rider racing down from the rise to the left, from the direction of Ranger.

The man swerved at sight of the Texan, his purple shirt billowing out in the wind. That shirt told his identity—Bob Wilcox. He seemd to change his mind, and cut over toward Mingo.

In another minute the Texan read in his scarlet face and inflamed eyes that Bob had had more liquor since talking to his father. Sight of Mingo had angered him.

"You're not fooling anybody!" he flung out, thickly, pulling his mount up short. "What your business on Bar W range?"

"Riding off it," grinned Mingo, reflecting that Bob had not heard the news about Circle Dot dismissing him.

"You'd better! You didn't fool me any, running that Wild Bill Hickok blazer on me, with Tevizon! That hombre was gunning you, *not me.*" His face clouded. "That skunk has been botherin' Prim, too. Pity you didn't shoot yourselves to death over her. But you can't come that on me, either of you!" He wheeled, to make off.

"Listen, Bob." Mingo blocked him. "You've got me wrong. Miss Sagamore is yours—if you've got sense enough to act the man. You ought to be booted from here to Ranger, the way you've been acting, with a fine girl like that thinking you are decent."

"Shut up! Don't talk about her!" The other drew back menacingly, hand at his holster. "I'd do right to drill you, you damned gunman!"

"I'd advise you not to," said the Texan quietly. "If you wasn't drunk I'd tell you something—how Miss Sagamore has been working for peace, for *your* sake, and *hers!* While you're carousing around, on bloody beef and whiskey, stirring up more trouble! Your dad hasn't told you, but I'll tell you, now, at the risk of your drunken tongue—I came here at your dad's request—I'm through with Circle Dot now; my only interest in Miss Sagamore was to help patch

up this trouble so she and you could get married, like you planned. If you've got sense enough to go home and straighten up—"

"It's a lie—a dirty lie!" The young man's eyes blazed. He yanked out his gun, waved it recklessly, as the Texan's jaw clicked. Only Bob's condition saved him a lesson. "I saw Prim this morning, right after I left the Jinglebob, and she wouldn't even recognize me, and when I walked up and made her talk she said she'd call you to send me about my business—said I was drinking. You told her that, you damned busybody!"

"I wouldn't call names, Bob!" said the Texan, earnestly. "In the first place, I didn't tell her—she's got eyes. You were a fool to go to her with a thick tongue—"

"That so?" The young man's lip curled back. "You can't cut me out! I'm going to see her right now! I reckon she was sorry, *because she invited me.* I'm on my way now!" He sank spurs to force his horse past the rider who had blocked his passage.

Mingo brought his mount full around, seized Bob's horse by the check-strap. "I'd throw that flask away before I tried to see Miss Prim." With a quick reach the Texan lifted the bottle from the other's hip pocket, flung it to the ground smashing it.

"Let go!"

"Let go that horse!" Young Wilcox's gun was up again.

"I'd advise you to go back home, Bob, and not let Miss Prim see you lickered up like you are," urged the Texan, soothingly. "For your own good—"

"Let go that horse!" Young Wilcox's gun was up again, and the muzzle rested

on the other's middle. "Or I'll let you have it sure!" His hand trembled in nervous excitement. Mingo saw the futility of argument; there was no choice except to shoot him or obey. Bob was given the trail.

But as he swept by, Mingo decided he must prevent the meeting with Prim if possible—for Bob's own sake. Prim might forgive her fiancé the inebriety of the morning; but there would be a limit. After all, young Wilcox might not be a bad sort. Mingo felt sympathetic toward him; to have had an engagement to wed Prim Sagamore broken off would have driven a stronger man to drink, the Texan admitted to himself. Now, in Bob's belligerent mood, it would be foolish to follow him openly to head him off. The Texan went at a leisurely jog in the general direction of the Sagamore headquarters; he would either cut around later and divert Prim's attention, or take Bob's gun by a surprise sally.

Tevizon, at 'Dobe Tombs, could wait, when Prim's happiness was involved, even though Mingo had ridden hard to meet the killer at the 'dobes while Tevizon was there alone. That the little gunman was alone Mingo knew, for the reason that the cowboy watch had been on the job all morning and would have seen others arrive. The remainder of the band had been in Ranger that morning, except the three Sagamore importees, and these could not have reached the Tombs since daylight without being seen. The Texan hurried his gait as Bob Wilcox dropped over a rise, northward.

Mingo bent his course slightly westward, dropped along the gentle slope of the valley, out of Bob's sight, and then broke into a swift gallop, to beat young Wilcox to the Sagamore house.

He had ridden vigorously for ten minutes, consuming two miles, when he struck the flat range. He was surprised on looking back that Bob Wilcox was nowhere in sight.

"Wonder if Bob was lying about meeting Prim," he mused, somewhat baffled. He did not think so. Speeding to the nearest rise, his gaze swept the rolling lomas north and east. He was surprised to see Bob Wilcox's mount halted at a spot that had been pointed out to him as the juncture of the old Bar W and Circle Dot trails, the little used forks since the land dispute. The forks were not far from the draw in which lay the two adobes. Bob seemed to be waiting for someone.

Mingo Haws turned abruptly, dropped back along the slope the way he had come, and rode swiftly. He did not believe it likely that Prim and Bob had agreed on a rendezvous at the old forks, but such a thing might have occurred.

When a mile from the forks, on the 'Dobe Tombs side, he spurted up the slope to take another look, fearing after all he had been outwitted in the effort to prevent the meeting. Suddenly he beheld a picketed horse in a dry watercourse to the right. Above the animal on the slope he saw a cowboy, flat on his stomach, hat off, revealing a bald head. The puncher was watching something over the rise with a pair of field-glasses.

Mingo went up the slope more slowly and when near the crest dismounted and went the remaining distance on foot. As his eyes swept the range northward his jaw dropped, in slow amazement. Prim Sagamore and Bob Wilcox, with a third rider whom he did not recognize at that distance, were traveling steadily from the old forked roads to the edge of 'Dobe Tombs draw. While the Texan watched, they reached the head of the draw, bent their course slightly, and then dropped into the draw, headed directly for the Tombs, less than a mile away.

"What fool move is that?" thought the Texan, swiftly. He knew Tevizon was in the draw at that moment. It was not likely that the gunman would offer violence to these three, but if interrupted in his plans there was no telling. Hurrying back to his horse, Mingo decided to head them off; Tevizon might have framed a lure to get Bob Wilcox; he probably had had a leading hand in the raid on the Bar W the night before and might be planning another this night by shooting Bob, drawing Bar W men to the Tombs, and running off Wilcox's herds during the excitement. Mingo did not dream how near he had come to hitting upon Tevizon's motives, without judging exactly his line of action. As he swung into saddle, he saw the bald-headed cow-

boy on the opposite slope, waving his big hat frantically.

There was no doubt he was waving to Mingo, and the Texan swept down the dip and up the hill toward him. Leaving his mount under the crest, the Van Horn man approached the stranger on foot, where it was obvious the latter had been doing his watching under cover. Mingo recognized the messenger rider who had come and departed at the Bar W, the one who had brought news to Box Wilcox of the presence of Tevizon in the draw.

"Come yere, cowboy!" shot out the bald-headed one, moon eyes on the Texan. "You ain't ridin' a Circle Dot hoss—yo're the hombre I seen goin' in to talk to Bill Wilcox when I left. Me, I'm Dick Berry, I don't know who yo' are—"

"Name's Haws. Yo're the one who brought news about Tevizon," said the Texan, hastily, for there was no time to lose.

"Yeh—Bill Wilcox told yuh, heh? Listen, I was yere watchin' to see if that killer left or what he done, when I seen Bob Wilcox and Miss Prim meetin' there at the forks—"

"Who's that other rider? Why are they going down into the draw?" snapped Mingo, impatiently.

"That's jist it! Take a look through these glasses!" He extended his binoculars, and the Texan made haste to use them.

"Careful! Don't let Tevizon see yuh!" warned Dick Berry, creeping up beside the Texan. "You see anythin' funny about the way that girl sets her hoss?"

"She's tied, stirrup to stirrup," commented Mingo, grimly. "Tell me quick, what happened there at the forks!"

"I was watchin' Tevizon, like Bill told me to do till he come. That skunk is still in that lower 'dobe. Lew Sagamore's bunch is back there," gesturing far to the left, "workin' with the herd they're gettin' ready to ship. Along comes Bob, and I trains my glasses on him, thinkin' he might be goin' to hunt Tevizon, fool drunk. Then I see Miss Prim ridin' and Bob waitin' at the forks. They didn't have time to say two words when they come together till two hombres rises out of that clump of cedars by the forks and stick 'em up. The girl fights like a badger, scratchin' and clawin', in spite of their guns; then they ties her. I was plumb 'stonished—"

"Quick—that rider one of 'em?"

"Yeah. I trains my field-glasses on' em, and make out the faces of Full-House Cox and Baca—I never trusted that breed a minute from the time I first set eyes on him—that's Baca takin' 'em down to the 'dobes, now! Pris'ners!"

"Prisoners," murmured the Texan, bolting back toward his horse. "Where'd Full-House go?"

"Drapped behind the cedars," puffed the bald-headed one, following down the slope.

"Stick here," commanded the Texan sharply. "Use your glasses. I may need you yet, to guard some prisoners, before I get through." He took the saddle.

CHAPTER XV

Out of Rifle Range

WITHOUT knowing any more about Tevizon's double kidnapping plan than the general surmise that there was some sinister purpose in the capture of the youth and girl, and the enforced escort of them toward the murder shacks in the draw, Mingo Haws set out with the determination to nip the little scheme in the bud. He raked his wiry paint horse and crossed the rise at a dead run.

Fortunately he was able to bend his course aslant of the draw, out of effective rifle range of the 'dobe houses in which he knew lurked Tevizon. Taking a direct course southwest, he aimed to cut off the trio before they had progressed to within twelve or thirteen hundred yards of the shacks, which spelled safety so far as a reliable target for Tevizon was concerned. The little gunman's turn would come after this business was disposed of.

He galloped down the gentle slope of the wide draw, on a bee-line for the two captives and their custodian, the half-breed Baca. Mingo was now in the open, and he knew by the excited actions of Baca that his purpose was suspected. The breed was crowding Bob Wilcox's horse, urging a swifter gait. Baca held the reins of Prim's mount, pulling the animal and the girl rider

with him. The Texan saw that her hands were free; only her boots were roped to the stirrups and across, under the cinches; but that was enough to hold her.

He did not spare the rowels, moderate as he had always been in the use of the spur. By now he was certain that Tevizon must have seen him; his gaze swept the 'dobes; the little gunman was staying out of sight, but there was no doubt he was posted so that he could watch the approach of Baca and his charges. One thing gave Mingo satisfaction—the flat-nosed killer would be without a horse to go to the aid of Baca. This was the natural surmise if Tevizon were lying in wait for someone, in hiding, at the Tombs. Mysterious as had been the sudden appearances and disappearances at the two shacks, it was out of reason to expect a horse to be secreted there.

Mingo would have liked to ask Dick Berry a number of questions, whether the bald-headed puncher had seen Tevizon dispose of his horse farther back, among others; but there had not been time. Just now his attention was centered on Baca's efforts to outrun him to the adobes with the captives. The Texan swerved slightly more westward, to head them off completely, risking a chance shot from the hiding gunman. Only an accident would enable Tevizon to hit him at that distance.

Bob Wilcox, in the lead, pressed by the Bar W half-breed, was riding obediently at a lope, unbound, Mingo noted. Prim was helpless, her hands reinless, with no choice but to remain with the traveling lead horse. Or so it seemed.

Abruptly, without slackening his pace, Mingo's intent gaze fell on a movement that caused him to lean forward and to squint, amazed, through the glare of the midday sun. He was not mistaken; Prim's right foot, stockinged and bootless, was free from the stirrup. A dozen strides farther, and the Texan beheld her supple figure rise from the saddle. She was on the ground, and running backward.

A shout of exultation rose to Mingo's lips at the skill with which Prim had freed her feet from the tied tan boots and left the convoyed animal. She was a horsewoman! At that instant Baca seemed to realize what had happened; he jerked his mount back on its haunches, dropped the reins of Prim's horse, and turned his own bronco in pursuit. Bob Wilcox, too, had halted in uncertainty.

Riding furiously now, Mingo beheld the unequal race in the trough of the draw. Prim was quick, athletic, an excellent runner, but handicapped in stockinged feet on rough thorny ground, and of course no match for a horse. As Baca drew down on her, gesturing, bellowing, as the faint sounds floating to Mingo's ears gave evidence, she did not slacken her gait, even though the enraged breed might be threatening to shoot. Mingo saw the man circle his rope, let fly, and halt suddenly.

The Texan's lean jaw drew taut at sight of the cruel rope that settled over the girl's shoulders and yanked her brutally to the ground, as Baca might have thrown an outlaw horse. The range was wide for a pistol, but Mingo fired from the saddle, without slackening his pace. At that moment he saw a horse break over the crest of the rise directly opposite. A suggestion of a hairy face told Mingo the newcomer was Full-House Cox. He was tearing downward toward Baca and the prostrate girl. The breed had turned and began dragging his captive back toward her grazing horse.

Mingo's shot had done no damage, as he had expected. He would be within shooting distance in another two minutes. While his reason told him he would prefer to take Baca captive and force from him a confession of the whole performance and what was back of it, his brain burned with the man's brutality and the old tiger blood clamored for swift vengeance.

He glanced once toward 'Dobe Tombs, and that glance revealed the squat figure of Tevizon in the ruined doorway of the lower shack, his sombreroed head thrust forward.

Mingo dismissed him; he was too far away now to be a factor without a horse. The Texan saw Prim's hands struggling to hold the rope as Baca dragged her, and he breathed a sigh of relief; she had not been injured to the point of unconsciousness. Baca was dismounting, near where Prim's horse idled. Mingo smiled grimly; the breed would never succeed in tying her

to the animal again. He laid his hand on his gun butt.

At that instant Baca paused, his gorilla arms about the girl. Instead of attempting to get her into the saddle again he held a crouching position on the ground, the girl in front of him, and opened fire.

The Texan reined short, as the singing ball tore his saddle leather. Dangerous as the double target was, Mingo was confident he could find an opening behind the shield, given time, for the girl was struggling with her captor. The Texan saw her hands — both of them — wrench at the breed's pistol. That act had prevented a second shot, and the Texan streaked forward at a gallop.

He saw Baca's crooked arm about Prim Sagamore's throat; her hands loosened from the big revolver, and the breed raised it again. Mingo's own weapon was unsheathed, leveled, but there was no opening — no way to reach a vital spot in the man without shooting Prim. The Texan hugged his bronco's mane and raked his flanks, leaning low, conscious that Full-House Cox was now within pistol range, but bent solely for the moment on silencing the renegade nearest at hand. The half-breed's gun roared a second time, and Mingo drove a bullet to the spot whence it had been fired, as the leaden slug whistled at his ear.

Mingo saw the man circle his rope, let fly, and halt suddenly.

Out of the tail of his eye Mingo had seen Bob Wilcox break and ride up the slope. Full-House Cox had swung down, to mask himself behind his horse; this act, and the menace of the Texan, was giving Bob his chance to escape. The half-breed, holding his position behind Prim, had not fired since the shot of the lean-jawed invader. Mingo understood the reason thoroughly, for he could not miss a mark as plain as Baca's arm and shoulder as it had jutted around the prisoner girl. Then the breed's one arm, the left, raised above the young woman's head. It told Mingo that Baca could not raise the right arm in token of surrender even if he had tried. The Texan, ignoring the breed for the time being,

swerved toward the horse behind which Full-House had bulwarked himself. He rode Indian style, body swung far out at the side of his wiry paint, gun weaving under the animal's neck.

Full-House Cox did not fire; there was no target save the pinto horse, Mingo knew, from the manner of his riding. And a slain horse, a motionless carcass, would have given the Texan a better shield than his living mount. Full-House was keeping himself well masked behind his living mount, save for his legs, and Mingo did not waste lead. The rider bore down on the hairy-faced assassin, remembering that first day at the Tombs when the bearded one had shot him after killing Flem Jones.

"You are not going down there alone, are you, Mr. Mingo?"

As Mingo curved about his game, Full-House jerked up his hands behind the horse, in token of surrender. The move was not unexpected by Mingo since the example set by Baca, who continued to stand beside Prim Sagamore with his one arm raised, the other limp. Prim too was standing now, making no effort to flee since the arrival of the Texan. Bob Wilcox had dropped from sight over the crest of the nearest slope.

The former ranger quickly disarmed the two Bar W renegades. His first words were addressed to Prim: "Are you hurt, Miss?"

"No Mr. Haws." Her eyes were filled with gratitude. "You are a real man!" She turned her gaze toward the rise behind which Bob Wilcox had disappeared.

Mingo, sober-faced, whirled on Baca and Full-House, now standing sullenly together.

"You've got one minute to talk!" he said sharply. "Who put you up to this, and why?"

Full-House scowled darkly. "We was workin' alone for Bill and Bob Wilcox, helpin' Bob to take this filly so's they could be married."

"That is a lie," affirmed the girl, coldly. "Bob had nothing to do with it, I could tell by the way he acted, even if he was a—coward. They were using us, taking us to the 'dobes for some reason—probably to

lure both outfits here, while they and their friends ran off our herds! They would likely keep it quiet until dark."

"Your minute's about up — talk fast, Cox!—" Mingo cut off, as a rifle report echoed from the 'dobes in the draw below them. A spent ball thudded against Baca's horse, near where Prim was standing; the animal reared, came down wild-eyed. The bullet had struck the saddle fender.

A second report, and a puff of dust at their feet. The Texan's eyes were on 'Dobe Tombs. Tevizon was not in sight, but shooting from within the lower shack, Mingo knew. At that fourteen hundred yards a bullet would kill, though the outlaw's aim would be uncertain. Mingo thought of the danger to Prim.

"Get on your horses!" he ordered the kidnapping pair. "Can you ride, Miss Prim?" For answer she ran to her pony and mounted, while Full-House and Baca sullenly climbed into their saddles. A rider came loping down from the slope at the east. A glance told Mingo it was Dick Berry, the bald-headed watch.

Taking the saddle, the Texan drove the two renegades before him up the draw, motioning to Berry to cut over that way. Prim rode beside him, in silence. When completely out of range of Tevizon's rifle Mingo ordered the prisoners down, cut Baca's saddle rope, bound their arms securely behind their backs and turned them over to Dick Berry as the puncher joined them.

"Stand guard over 'em till I get back," directed Mingo. "Don't take 'em to Bar W, or they'll outlie me and you both and Bill will turn 'em loose again to do more devilment. I'll look after 'em after I settle with their *jefe* down there," gesturing toward the Tombs. "Miss Prim, I reckon it'll be quite safe now for you to ride back to Circle Dot from here, don't you think it will?"

She nodded, but her smooth forehead wrinkled in worriment; she walked aside instead of mounting, her eyes beckoning the Texan. He went to her quickly.

"You are not going down there alone, are you, Mr. Mingo?" she asked in low tones, searching his severe, lined face.

"There's no use to bring a gang. You're safe to ride, don't you reckon, Miss Prim, with Berry watching these fellows?"

"Please don't—go down—there!" she beseeched him, fear struggling to full possession in her earnest eyes. "Tevizon is in the 'dobes, and he's planned to kill you—this time without fail. I overheard Baca whisper to Cox and ask if Cox had told Tomlinson to be sure to get the news to you about me being a prisoner at the Tombs, before the general alarm was given—"

"Tomlinson, eh? Like I thought! Which means Powder LaMotte and Monk Baizee too. That makes the six, Miss Prim; things are breaking our way. We've got two, and Tevizon is next. Then the war will end and Bob can—"

"Oh, please! But promise you won't go down there to fall into that trap and be shot again. Maybe I won't be able to nurse you well again!" She tried to smile. "It won't be bravery, even, to face Tevizon there, but suicide; it is a death trap, made to kill those whom these murderers dare not face in the open. Please—!"

"You're making it hard for me to do my duty, Miss Prim, and if I don't go pronto it'll be too late. You ride home, quick as you can!" He hurried to his pinto horse, mounted, and with a parting word to Dick Berry to hold the prisoners in the upper draw, rode toward the Tombs, more than a mile away in the trough of the draw.

(*To be continued.*)

He sprung to his feet and stood, intently gazing at the pallid form before him.

CALICO BILL'S UNDERSTUDY

By T. L. Krebs

The sheriff was surprised when he learned who Calico Bill's accomplice was, but not more surprised than Bill's understudy when he learned who CALICO BILL was.

IN the middle of the morning, Sheriff Andale climbed from his horse and made his way stiffly toward the little shanty that housed his office. His tall figure and muscular body could not belie the droop of his shoulders, the pallor showing through the tan of his face. For more than twenty-four hours, barely recovered from a serious wound, he had been in the saddle on the trail of "Calico Bill," a bandit who had terrorized Jasper County for the last few months.

Before the sheriff could reach his office the door was flung open, and he was hailed by one of his deputies, who balanced himself precariously on a home-made crutch.

"Glad ye come, Sheriff! Got a phone from down the street a few minutes ago. Bank held up. Cashier shot. Money gone!"

Fatigue and undressed scalp wound of the past night forgotten, the sheriff threw up his head and shoulders, and dashed into the office.

"Any o' the boys out after the robber?"

"Long Sam an' Chips went soon's word came," reported the deputy. "Confounded busted leg keeps me here missin' all the fun."

"Don't worry. That leg's gettin' on all right. Soon be good as new."

"Hope so, doggone it. Boys phoned they may be two o' the holdup men. The Chink

as runs the restaurant alongside the bank says he seen a feller run for the bushes in the arroyo from the back door of the bank, just as some bird on horseback beat it through the alley t'wards the open country an' the mountains."

While the deputy talked, Sheriff Andale was not idle. He replenished his cartridge belt, hurriedly cleaned his six-guns, grabbed up a filled canteen, and made for the door.

"Get Jimmy Stevens to look after my horse soon's ye can phone. Poor Piute's had a hard time of it last night an' yesterday. I'm goin' to run over to the corral an' get the roan. He's good. P'r'aps 'twas Calico Bill again. I'm goin' to get that Bird 'fore I quit, or know why I don't."

Hour after hour the hoofs of the sheriff's powerful roan pounded the hard sand of the plains that stretched between the little border town of Jasperite and the forbidding range of hills crouching like a line of skirmishers before the snow-topped mountains that towered beyond. He had stopped only a few minutes at the site of the holdup, and as his deputies had taken the trail up the arroyo, he followed the other clue leading along the trail toward the distant range, hoping that the bandit would find himself between the deputies and himself before he could reach the pass that led into the mountain fastnesses where he probably had his lair.

Shortly before nightfall of the gloomy November day, as the sheriff rode in among the foothills, he caught first sight of his quarry, and spurred his horse to renewed exertion.

The cayuse of the fugitive was showing signs of exhaustion, with the rider making desperate efforts to drive it forward at top speed. Soon it became apparent that it was only a matter of minutes when the race would end.

As the sheriff sent a warning shot over the head of the fugitive, the latter made a half turn in the saddle, fired, and a bullet went singing over the sheriff's head.

"Damn, that hain't Calico Bill after all!" exclaimed Sheriff Andale disgustedly. "I'm chasing the wrong man—letting the big game get away while I'm after this fellow."

He did not, however, slacken his speed, and while the fugitive was making frantically for the screen of bushes and scrub trees of the ravine, he urged his roan to still greater speed, and aimed another shot at the flying figure now only dimly outlined in the gloom of the ravine through which they were racing.

As the sheriff fired, a sharp cry came from the fleeing rider, and he was hurtled into the bushes past which his frightened horse sped.

A few moments later the sheriff halted beside the fallen man, and leaped from his horse.

He stooped and dragged the fugitive from the bushes—a young man, almost a boy, not more than twenty or twenty-one.

His features were clean-cut, his hair brown and wavy. A dark stain on the shoulder of his blue shirt showed where the sheriff's bullet had struck.

"Poor shootin'," mused the sheriff, "Meant to get him through the bridle-arm."

Glancing about he caught sight of a cabin up the ravine. "Hope old Brannab's at home," he muttered.

With much exertion he succeeded in placing his unconscious prisoner on his horse, and led it toward the shack. The cayuse, after galloping ahead a few rods stopped, snorted, and slowly followed.

After dragging his charge into the cabin and placing him on the bunk of the absent prospector, he pulled the bloody sleeve away from the wounded shoulder. With experienced eyes and hands he examined the wound where the bullet had cut through the flesh without apparently touching the bone.

"You're lucky, my bucko," he muttered to himself. He grabbed up a rusty pail, filled it from the icy mountain stream near the cabin, stopped for a moment to tie the horses in the shack adjoining the cabin, and was soon busy again with his prisoner.

"Only a kid he seems to be, poor fellow, confound him," he soliloquized. "What the devil is it that makes these young bucks go to the bad every chance they get!"

The prisoner showed signs of returning consciousness. His lips twitched—his eyelids fluttered.

As the sheriff pulled the sleeve farther

from the wounded shoulder until the arm just above the elbow was exposed, his eyes suddenly began to dilate. He gazed, as if transfixed, upon a scar showing like a brand, plainly revealing the outline of two letters. "My God!" he sprang to his feet, and stood intently gazing at the pallid form before him.

For a moment the little room of the crude cabin seemed to whirl about the sheriff's head, as visions of early days flashed before him as if thrown upon a screen. Many years ago he and his brother, ten years younger, lived on the old farm with their grandfather. His mother died when the brother was born. His father enlisted in the army at the outbreak of the war with Spain, and was killed in the Philippines. Another picture flashed through the sheriff's mind. It was mid-winter, the snow deep without, and he and his brother had been tumbling playfully in the invigorating element until the noon hour. In a friendly scuffle, little Benny accidentally stumbled against a red-hot stove. He struck his arm, bared for washing up for dinner, in such a way that two of the letters on the name-plate on the stove were imprinted in the tender flesh as if put there with a branding iron. Vividly he remembered the pinched smile and the fortitude of the little sufferer, while his burn was being dressed. Another picture flashed before the eyes of the sheriff as he knelt at the side of the wounded man. The grandfather, their only relative, was dead. The boys, despite their pleadings, were separated. The younger was sent somewhere to an orphan asylum, the older was hired out to a stolid farmer. Years passed, during which the boys never saw each other, nor did they ever hear from each other. The older soon ran away from his Scandinavian taskmaster, drifted out West, and finally into his present position, which he had honorably filled for several years.

While he carefully bathed and bandaged the wound, the sheriff's lips quivered. His strong face, over-shadowed by a thatch of graying hair, twitched as if from some almost unendurable pain.

"Benny, Benny!" he groaned. "To meet like this after so many years!"

The young man, evidently more stunned by his fall than by his wound, suddenly awoke. For a moment he stared into the face bent over him, batting his eyes as if endeavoring to recall the events that had brought him into his present position.

"Benny! Brother! Don't you know old Phil no more?" The sheriff's voice was husky.

For a moment the young man's brow was puckered. Then suddenly a joyous light came into his eyes, to be followed immediately by a tensing of the muscles of the mouth that had almost opened to speak. A hard look came into the young face.

"What you talkin' about, feller? Damn ye. I hain't no brother o' yourn."

He impatiently drew the sleeve over his exposed arm.

"Aw, Benny! Sure you remember poor old Phil, brother Phil, an' Dad, an' Grandpa. Wake up—sure ye remember us, an' the old home in Michigan," the sheriff pleaded.

"Ye're crazy, feller. I never had no brother an' I never was nowhere near Michigan in my life!" was the harsh response. "I don't know what ye're tryin' to hang on me. I hain't no brother o' yourn."

For a moment the sheriff was puzzled. He had seen the play of emotion that flashed for an instant on the face of the young man. He felt that the brand was unmistakable. and yet—

"I'm goin' to take you in to Jasperite an' land ye in jail no matter who ye are," he said sadly. "To-night we'll rest. We both need it. Early to-morrow we start back."

He sat in profound silence, his eyes resting with a far-away look upon the slender form before him.

"I'm not goin' to put irons on ye. I just can't do it. You're wounded an' besides, deny it as much as ye please, you're my little kid brother."

The prisoner's face twitched. He bit his lips—then placed his hand on his wounded shoulder, as if a sudden physical pain caused the change in his face.

"Do as ye damn please, Sheriff; that's up to you. I hain't no brother to no man with a star pinned to his coat."

"All right, then. P'r'aps it's just as well," the sheriff replied gloomily. "I'm trustin'

ye, an' you must promise you'll not try to beat it."

"Not on ye're life," interjected the prisoner scornfully.

"You'll not try to make a getaway, I tell ye!" retorted the sheriff sternly. "You're tired out an' wounded. Lay down an' sleep, an' don't make no false move if ye don't want to go back in irons. In the mornin' I'll do whatever I can for ye; but back ye go, an' I'll give ye up to the law no matter how it hurts."

He ended with a sound that seemed like a suppressed sob.

"Fine brotherly love that is, hain't it?" sneered the prisoner.

"Look here, boy," the sheriff flared up. "Whoever ye are, or whoever I think ye are, hain't got a damn thing to do with it. You're a bank robber an' a murderer, an' I'm an officer o' the law. Don't make no mistake about that!"

The prisoner's face had suddenly turned deathly pale. Then he flared with indignation, as he sprang from the couch on which he had been seated.

"What're tryin' to pull off?" he shrieked. "What's yer game about bank robbin' an' murder?'

" 'Course ye don't know you robbed the bank at Jasperite an' shot the cashier!" the sheriff retorted sternly. " 'Course not! What's the use o' tryin' to lie out of it after ye're caught red-handed!"

"I tell ye—" For a moment the prisoner stood with pale lips parted, as if about to burst into a torrent of words. Then he clamped his jaws tightly together, and sank back with a groan.

"What's the use talkin'," he murmured, as he turned sulkily toward the wall, and stretched out on the cot.

The sheriff's attempt to trap the prisoner into a confession that might clear him of complicity in the holdup had failed. He sat in silence, his face haggard. At last he arose, spread several skins and Indian blankets upon the rough plank floor, and sank heavily down upon this uninviting bed. Soon the strain of the last forty-eight hours overwhelmed him, and he lay in an apparently deathlike sleep.

The wind whistled dolefully about the cabin, and rushed with a mournful sound through the tops of the pines. The snow fell in fitful flakes, enveloping mountains, rocks, and ravines with its cold, feathery blanket. The young prisoner lay huddled in his bunk, and stared with sleepless eyes at the wall, on which the fire, sinking lower and lower, painted fantastic, ever-moving shadows.

A fierce tumult raged in the young man's breast. With a deep sense of loyalty to a man who had saved him but a few days since from a horrible death, he felt, after the accusations of the sheriff, that this man had deceived him. The service he had asked of him when he requested him to wait for a signal from him at the corner of the bank in Jasperite, and then to ride as fast as possible to the cabin in which he now lay wounded and to await him there, had something crooked about it. After the sheriff's accusation it began to dawn upon him that he must have been duped, and innocently made an accomplice of the mysterious friend with the peculiarly mottled and not at all prepossessing face. But whatever might be behind these strange actions, he still hoped that Bill Foley, his friend, could and would explain everything when he arrived at the cabin some time in the night as he had promised. But, there was the sheriff. Would it not be best to slip silently away, and save the man who had treated him with so much consideration the mortification that was bound to come in the end?

After careful deliberation he cautiously sat up on his bunk, and was about to slip from the cabin, when a faintly audible tapping at the window caused him to look up.

The snow had ceased falling, the brilliant moon was shining full upon the young man from an almost cloudless sky. In plain view at the window was the mottled face of his friend pressed close to the little panes of glass, staring with glowing eyes into the dimly lighted cabin.

With difficulty the young man suppressed an exclamation, and frantically beckoned the other back. Quickly and noiselessly he slipped from the cabin.

"Who's that bird sleepin' in there?" were the first words he was asked in a fierce whisper.

The young man stepped a few feet from the cabin before he answered, whispering hurriedly:

"Some feller that chased me. I didn't know anyone was after me, till he yelled an' blazed away at me."

The other cursed through clenched teeth.

"He's harmless. I winged him, an' got him tied hand an' foot," lied the younger man glibly.

"Good. I'll take a look at 'im when we're ready to start. You done me a good turn by throwin' them skunks off my trail. It give me time to 'tend to another little job. Me an' you're pardners from now on."

"But now tell me who ye really are, an' what this partnership will mean to me. You told me you rode for the Circle M Ranch, an' you were goin' to play a joke on your friend at the bank. That feller in there says the bank at Jasperite was stuck up an' the cashier killed this morning. I want to stand by ye, 'cause you saved my life, but I never done anything crooked, an—"

While he was speaking the other's face darkened, his peculiar birthmarks making it appear like an old piece of vari-colored cloth, and a cruel, cold look flashed from his eyes. Snarlingly he interrupted the young man.

"Ever take a good look at me?" he asked savagely.

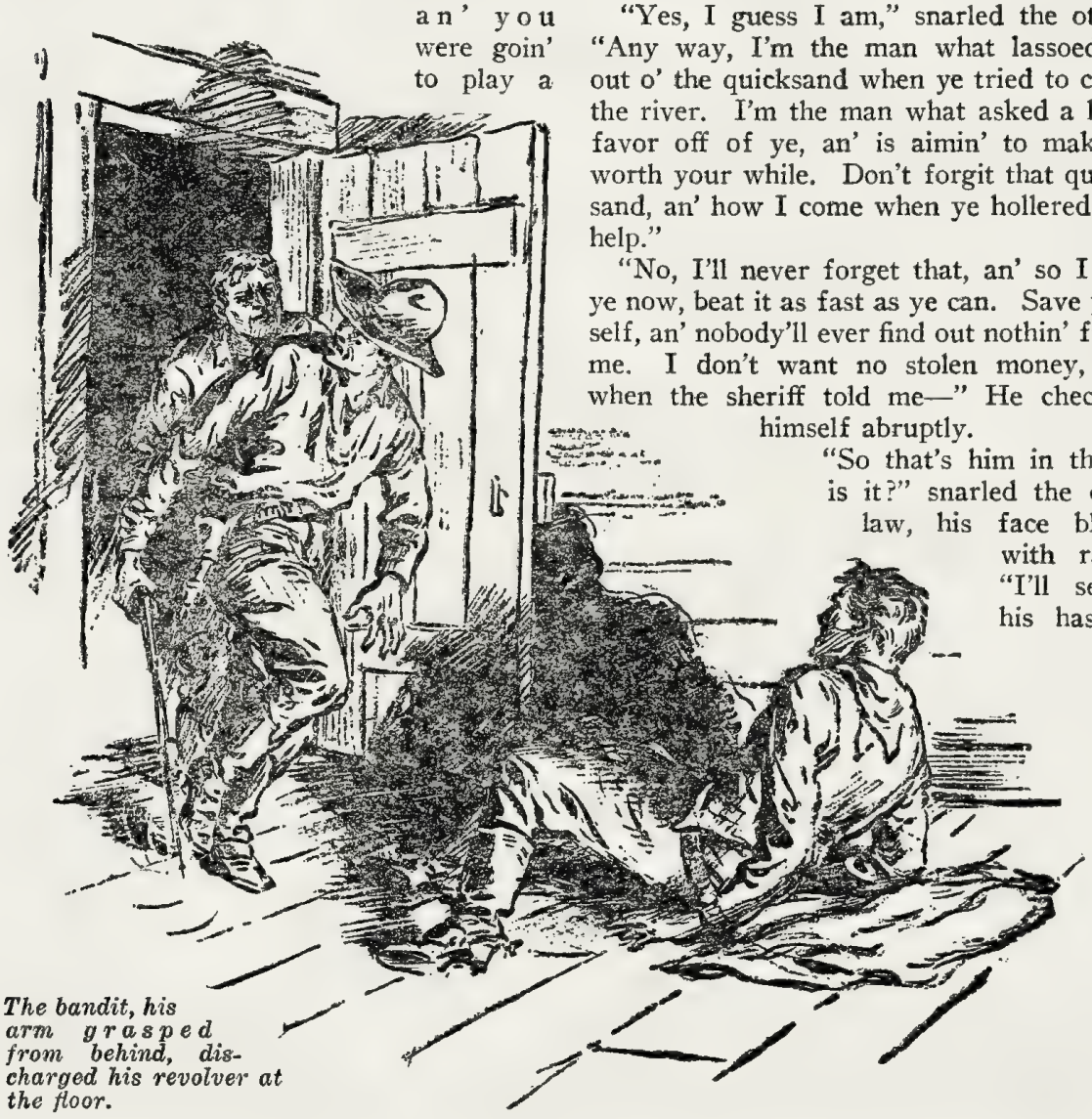
The other gasped, and with widened eyes stared at the revolting countenance pushed close to his own face.

"So you're—you're—?" he whispered.

"Yes, I guess I am," snarled the other. "Any way, I'm the man what lassoed ye out o' the quicksand when ye tried to cross the river. I'm the man what asked a little favor off of ye, an' is aimin' to make it worth your while. Don't forgit that quicksand, an' how I come when ye hollered for help."

"No, I'll never forget that, an' so I tell ye now, beat it as fast as ye can. Save yerself, an' nobody'll ever find out nothin' from me. I don't want no stolen money, an' when the sheriff told me—" He checked himself abruptly.

"So that's him in there, is it?" snarled the outlaw, his face black with rage. "I'll settle his hash!"



The bandit, his arm grasped from behind, discharged his revolver at the floor.

He strode toward the door, drawing his revolver. "Thought I'd got rid of 'im yesterday, when I tumbled 'im off his horse. Seems to have more lives 'n a cat. Well, it got me a fine night's sleep, an' a chance to hold up that fat Bar N payroll at the bank."

"The Bar N payroll?" groaned the other. "Why'd ye have to pick on robbin' my boss?"

"What's it to you, ye damn idiot? Git out!"

He pushed the young man viciously aside, and turned once more to the door, flinging it wide open.

As the bulky figure strode boldly into the cabin, his six-gun advanced, his companion frantically flung upon him from the rear. At the same moment the sheriff, wide awake, and for sometime listening to the suppressed voices outside the cabin, sprang at him. The bandit, his arm grasped from behind, discharged his revolver harmlessly into the floor, but immediately jerked himself loose, and lunged forward. His body met the impact of the sheriff's heavy frame almost in mid-air, as the officer sprang at his assailant, gripping his throat with iron fingers, driving the butt of his gun into the mottled face, encrusted with a week's stubbly growth of black hair. With a crunching twist of sinewy body, and a sound like the growl of a wild animal, the outlaw wrenched himself loose, staggered back, and once more fired. But simultaneously with his own shot came the bark of the sheriff's heavy Colt. His skull shattered by a well-placed bullet, the outlaw crashed to the floor, while the sheriff staggered heavily toward the couch.

For a moment following the brief, fierce battle there was silence in the sulphur-laden room. Then the young man dashed forward. Hastily he threw fuel on the glowing embers of the fireplace, and relighted the little lamp. He nervously began to pull and cut away the leg of the sheriff's trousers, which gradually darkened with the stain of the wounded man's blood.

"Phil—Phil," he moaned; "Phil, old man, tell me you're not dyin'. Tell me you're not hurt bad!"

The sheriff slowly opened his eyes.

"Benny—Benny—" he mumbled, a faint smile lighting up the ghastly pallor of his countenance. "You're here with me, an' you're my little brother, hain't you?"

"Yes, Phil, 'course I am, an' it almost killed me to deny it, when I'd hoped an' prayed all these years to find you!"

The sheriff faintly gripped his brother's hand.

"It's all right now, Benny. We stick to each other from now on, no matter what comes."

"Phil, when I seen you was chasin' me, an' even shootin' me, I knowed something was wrong somewhere. I knowed you soon's I came to, after you caught me. I made up my mind I wasn't goin' to make it harder for you when I seen you was a peace-officer. I didn't know then what he—" he pointed shudderingly to the silent form on the floor—"what he was, an' what he'd got me in to. I didn't want you to be tempted to let me get away 'cause I was your brother."

"Good boy, Benny. I know you're the right stuff," smiled the sheriff.

While they talked, Benny made an examination of the wound, the sheriff himself, propped up on the couch, assisting. With cold water checking the flow of blood, it was soon found that no large arteries had been severed, although the bandit's bullet had torn cruelly through the upper part of the limb. But the shock and loss of blood, together with the sheriff's weakened condition, and the mental and physical strain of the last forty-eight hours had made his case serious.

For an hour the brothers poured out their hearts to each other, until the sheriff, still clasping Benny's hand, fell into a quiet sleep.

Dawn was breaking, and Benny himself had been nodding for some time when voices and trampling hoofs came from without. As both men started up, a heavy knock sounded, and the door was flung open.

The sheriff barely had time to whisper:

"Let me do the talkin'," when his two deputies, Long Sam and Chips entered, guns in hand.

"Hurrah, here ye are, Sheriff!" came the joyous shout of Chips, while Long Sam's

first attention was given to the huddled form near the door.

"Calico Bill, by God!" he ejaculated fervently as he turned the dead bandit on his back, and the baleful, glassy eyes and mottled, stubbly face stared up at him. "Good work, Sheriff!"

"Where'd ye git 'im?" "Who's yer friend here?" "How come ye all here?" came the questions piling one up on the other.

"Let me first interduce my brother, boys," interrupted the sheriff. "My brother Benny. Puncher for the Bar N Ranch. We've been lost to each other for quite a few years. Run across him on my way out here."

"Oh, guess you was after that bird too, then, what got away with the Bar N payroll!" broke in Chips. "Well, let's look Calico Bill over, an' see what we can find."

He stooped over the dead bandit, and after a moment's search, straightened up with a fat roll of banknotes drawn from an inner pocket of Calico Bill's heavy coat.

"This looks like it, all right," he grinned.

"Best job I ever seen," spoke up Long Sam, a man of few words. "Loot recovered; cashier's head only creased—was on his way to the Chinaman's for supper when we rode in last evenin'—an' best of all, Calico Bill wiped out. We're in luck. I'll take your horse, Sheriff, an' ride. Back 'fore sundown with doctor. He'll patch ye up fer the trip home alright."

"Suits me," agreed the sheriff heartily. "But 'fore ye go, let me say if it hadn't been for my brother here, I'd be layin' on the floor there in Calico Bill's place; an' so I'm appointin' him one o' my deputies right now."

HENRY PLUMMER, OUTLAW SHERIFF

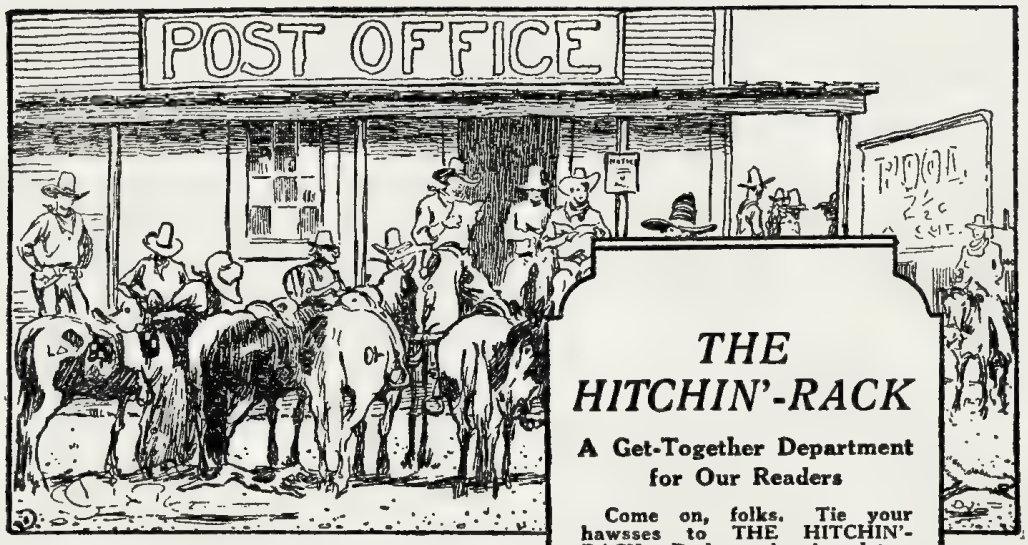
By Montana Bozeman

THE story of Henry Plummer is one of the most striking instances of organized outlawry during the early days of the West on record. Known as the man of a hundred murders, not to mention important thefts and robberies, he kept the placer-mining fields of Montana and Idaho fermenting with trouble in the early years of the '60's.

Soon after Plummer landed in Montana he became head of a gang of thieves, gamblers and killers, but his suave and assured manner deceived those who upheld law and order. When a Vigilante committee was formed he was among the first to join. The inside information this afforded him was responsible for the murder of more than one man opposed to the activities of his band. Express riders were fired upon and robbed and pack trains looted by these masked riders. Indignation mounted and the Vigilantes became more wary and suspicious. Plummer decided to take a bold step and kill the newly elected sheriff, Jack Crawford. He attempted to engage Crawford in a quarrel, confident that his ability to handle a gun (he was known as the best shot in the Rockies) would settle his now chief enemy without much trouble. But Crawford refused to give him an opening and tried to shoot Plummer from ambush. The wound was not fatal, however, and Crawford fled from Bannock, the town where the event took place, and never returned.

Henry Plummer now became the leading spirit of the ruffian-infested place, and succeeded in being elected the new sheriff. Among the men he chose for "deputies" were Jack Gallegher, Buck Stinson, and Ned Ray, all members of his band. When richer gold deposits were discovered a little farther up the line, and Virginia City sprang into being almost overnight, Plummer moved there with his "court" and began operations in real earnest. The town was overflowing with gold and men that found themselves suddenly wealthy, and the bandit-chief sheriff organized his activities into a well-planned system to take care of this rich field. He had clerks in every institution that was making monew to keep him posted when the shipments of dust were to be made. He stationed men on all the mountain trails, and knew beforehand if a well-staked miner was going back to the States with his pouches of gold. Stages traveling between Virginia City and Bannock had a mark placed on them if a rich passenger was inside; confederates between the two towns took care of further details. Murder after murder occurred.

But at length the killing of a young man took place that was particularly revolting, and two dozen Vigilantes went out from camp and arrested certain members of Plummer's gang who were under suspicion. Stolen guns and other articles were identified as belonging to those that had been robbed or murdered. Some of the outlaws confessed in part, and on the strength of these admissions the Vigilantes took Red Yager, Buck Stinson, and Ned Ray, who were among the leaders under Plummer. The party stopped at the Lorrain Ranch, near a cottonwood grove, and tried the prisoners without going into town. Red Yager confessed in full before he was hung, giving away Plummer and all members of the gang, naming their various positions in detail. Plummer was surprised with his coat and arms off, and in a short time was vainly begging for mercy at a scaffold where, as sheriff, he had lately hung a man.



THE HITCHIN'-RACK

A Get-Together Department for Our Readers

Come on, folks. Tie your hawsses to THE HITCHIN'-RACK. Perhaps there's a letter waiting for you in the post office—a letter from a cowboy who rides the herd at night dreaming of some girl back East—or from a Texas ranger doing his bit along the Mexican border—or from some buckaroo in Oregon cooling his heels on a corral fence.

Letters must be addressed to THE HITCHIN'-RACK — if intended for publication in this department. If you want to open up a correspondence with someone, state this clearly in your letter, together with your name and address, and you will receive your answers direct.

This department cannot be held responsible for statements made by letter writers.

Do not send any money to strangers.

A stamped and addressed envelope must be enclosed for reply.

PARAGRAPHS FROM THE EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK

THE STORY OF THIS MONTH'S COVER

THROUGH the long, cold winters, the steamingly-hot summers, the cool autumns and the springs that transform the West into a blaze of gold, the cowboy goes about his work. Elliott Dold's cover for this issue illustrates as only the brush of this brilliant artist can, one task that is without end: repairing the line fences. There was a day when the domains of the cattle barons stretched for miles across the range, unfenced. The battles fought over the imaginary lines that divided one empire from another caused the owners to throw up fences. It can be easily imagined what a long and tedious job this proved to be. And then after the fences were all up the cattle wars continued as before. It was easy enough for the rustler to tear wide gaps under the cover of darkness so that he might steal beef on the hoof, spirit it away to some coulée where the brands could be changed and then sold to a quick buyer for quick profits. Hurry calls followed, repair work had to be done, the best riders and shots on the ranch sent in pursuit of the marauders. The daily life of the West continues up to the present in spite of the wise ones who say that the West has disappeared. All one has to do is to follow the range war in the far West between the cattlemen and the sheepmen, or the Indian troubles in Oklahoma, or the Panhandle fights in Texas, to know that the West is a living, breathing, vital force in American life today — with millions of acres as yet unsettled and unconquered—holding out high hopes for the adventurous who are young in years or young in heart—and the land of men who live in the open next to the earth itself and still depend upon their courage and their stamina to see them through the arduous day's work. After all, there is much that does not get into the daily papers. All one has to do is ask one's self: "Where does my beef come from?" It isn't a vegetable or a mineral—it is cut from steers that must and will always be raised by hand. And that is why we like the job of editing "Cowboy Stories." Because, if we can't be out there on the range we can at least follow the cowboy in story form, even to repairing the line fence!

OUR OLD FRIEND—H. BEDFORD-JONES

ACE-HIGH MAGAZINE, the Big Brother of "Cowboy Stories," has been publishing H. Bedford-Jones' stories for many years. It is with real pride that we present his complete cowboy novel in this issue entitled: "LEACH OF THE BAR G BAR." From the moment that Joe Leach waltzes into Sunrise County and takes charge of the Bar G Bar up until the final dramatic moment of this whirlwind story, the reader's interest never lapses for one moment. Here is a man who writes and we don't mean maybe. It might be a good thing for all of us if you were to write "The Hitchin'-Rack" and give us your impressions of this novel. H. Bedford-Jones is a busy and popular author whose work is in constant demand. It might make him feel like using "Cowboy Stories" more often as the medium of his absorbing yarns, if you took the trouble to tell him all about your ideas in connection with his novel. Slip in a word or two about yourself. If possible we will publish your letter in a later issue so the rest of our readers can benefit by your ideas and enthusiasms.

ANOTHER CONNOR YARN

THIS hawss-wrangling cowboy from the T-Y Ranch out at Saratoga, Wyoming is sure becoming a regular contributor to these pages. Here he is again with his story: "THAT BUCKSKIN STRING." When Dover pits his buckskins against Delaney's black Morgans in the pursuit of Highlander, a wild horse, we know we are trailing with a real tale of the real West and then some! Mr. Connor knows horses. He has handled and ridden them from boyhood and he hasn't shaken off the wild and woolly to come East and settle down to merely write about his adventures.

SCOTT HAUTER

WRITE and tell us what you think of the Window-Sash Ranch stories. Do you enjoy reading about Boothill Boggs and his cronies as much as we do? As far as we're concerned we can't see how anyone could fail to laugh over these highly-amusing tales by the Old Timer, Scott Hauter. We are printing one in every issue.

MINGO OF THE CIRCLE DOT

DIDN'T we tell you that this serial novel by W. D. Hoffman would keep up its interest in the second installment? You bet it does. And the next one carries on with the same swift action, true-to-life characters and real Western setting. Mr. Hoffman is another writer who lives in the West that he writes about. In fact, only one or two of our writers live back East. These writers have had to do this for personal reasons and they keep writing to "Ye Editor" saying that as soon as opportunity presents itself they are going back for good. J. Irving Crump, for example, whose work appears only in "Cowboy Stories" is planning on some real ranch life in the not too distant future. But in the meanwhile he contributes a whale of a novel to the next isue entitled: "THE BRAND BLOTTERS OF LODI LEDGE." Be sure and watch for the next number. You will know it by the cover: a cowboy bulldogging a steer. It is almost as real as the actual thing itself. Go to your newsdealer now and reserve a copy of the April issue.

FROM OUR READERS

RIDIN' HERD

Dear Editor:

Please pardon the lapiz, but I'm in feverish haste to peruse James French Dorrance's "Ranchin' the Ragged Edge." Caballero, do give us some more of his R. C. M. P. novels during the año que viene. J. Edward Leithead's "Breed of the Saddle" is a bully (do not misunderstand me) story. Ridin' herd on "Ace-High," "Ranch Romances" and "Cowboy Stories" is some he-man's job, believe me. An Oregon amigo asserts that C. S. has taken the West by storm. How do you like that?

Buenas natividades y felices años nuevos to you guardaalmacén, the staff, and every son of a trader. Adios.

S. B. MORAN.

Boston, Mass. *"El del sombrero negro."*

NONE BETTER

In all the Western stories I have read I cannot say I have ever read any better than in "Cowboy Stories." I will not miss a single issue if possible. I have read the first and hope to read some more like "The Rustlers of R. R. B.," "Greener Than Grass," and also "Riders of the Sunset Trail." I would like to correspond with some cowboys.

AMANDA CANNON.

Box 718, Summerside, P. E. Island.

WILL BUY EVERY ISSUE

Dear Sir:

I was down to the store the other night and I saw one of your "Cowboy Stories," so of course I picked it up, looked at it, bought it, and took it home. I liked all the stories. This is the first time I ever read your book. But from now on I am going to buy every issue.

Yours sincerely,

WILLIAM WILKES.

136 Byron St., Youngstown, Ohio.

RIPSNORTIN' MAGAZINE

"How" Cowboys:

Just finished readin' th' furst one of yuhr "Cowboy Stories" 'at I ever layed my sleepers on, an' I sure think she's a ripsnortin' magazine. I read 'er from cover to cover, an' I think every storie is real he-man stuff. That "Singin' Steve of Star Valley" was sure a peach. I sure would like to get in touch with Mr. Glenn A. Connor. Tell him to drop me a line some time.

I am a roaming cowhand. At present I am in Manitoba and will be here until spring. Well, I guess I'll have t' say "Adios." Here's wishing the "Cowboy Stories" every success. I am,

Sincerely yours,

Manitoba, Canada. *RED CATHCART.*

THE BEST—BAR NONE

Dear Editor:

I am a new reader of "Cowboy Stories" and this book is the best of all, bar none. That story, "Singing Steve of Star Valley," is the best I ever read. Why, give me a story like that and I'll not put it down until I've finished it. Tell Mr. Crump to hurry and write another story like that, for I'll be waiting for it. Three cheers for "Cowboy Stories." May they never end.

Yours sincerely,

Muscatine, Ia. *LEONARD SCHENKEL.*

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Write out your announcement carefully, or typewrite it, and send it, together with slip at bottom of this page, to THE BARGAIN EXCHANGE, *care of* COWBOY STORIES, *Room 610, 799 Broadway, New York City. Announcements are limited to 21 words, and only bona fide exchanges will be published. Announcements of articles listed for sale are not admitted to this department.*

Your name and address must accompany each announcement when published.

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Columbia oak phonograph, 20 records, for radio. What have you? Wm. Hanna, 630 Yonge St., Toronto, Ont., Canada.

Trade A-1 .38 Colt, 7½-inch barrel, for A-1 1912 model Winchester pump, 16-ga. Wm. J. Robertson, 1154 Linda St., Rocky River, Ohio.

Trade seven-tube superheterodyne, complete, indoor aerial, loud speaker, and batteries. Prefer Colt automatic and typewriter. C. Lowe, Box 83, Pompano, Fla.

Exchange tenor banjo and case for 8 x 10 or larger printing press. John Sutko, 2048 W. 50th St., Chicago, Ill.

Have angora chaps, Mexican spurs, long boots, size 7, rope, etc. Want cameras, musical instruments. Walter Jordan, 256 West 4th St., South Boston, Mass.

Want course in illustrating or cartooning. What do you want? Have music and magazines. Eileen James, May View, Wash.

Have fiction by Zane Grey, London, Burroughs, Curwood, Sax Rohmer. Want light rifle, heavy Colt. Wm. Fay, 2724 W. Somerset, Philadelphia, Pa.

Have good watch, .32 Winchester repeating rifle. What have you? W. Burns, Sinks Grave, W. Va.

Favorite 2 x 3½ hand-inking card press, Excelsior 4½ x 7½ press, model press, cases, type, material. Want typewriter, courses. Frederick Largay, 12 Hugh St., Lowell, Mass.

Wanted—Drawing supplies, coins, carpenter tools, camera and assessories, radio parts, chemical outfit, coupons. Edward Schmuck, 1384 W. 95th St., Cleveland, O.

Crystal set and good fiction books. Want Colt target pistol or .25 automatic, good condition. R. Haner, 30 No. Beacon St., Allston, Mass.

Manual training bench, Palmer sign outfit, Jewelry-making course, polished gems. What have you? The Gem Shop, Wolf Creek, Montana.

Have five navy J tubes, other radio parts, shoulder holster, Luger. Want ¼ ampere tubes, loud speaker, kodak, revolver. L. Lane, 519 Mabbette St., Kissimmee, Fla.

Wanted—U. S. coins. Have coins, bills, stamps, books, and other things. M. Sockernoski, 1445 East 6th St., Bethlehem, Pa.

Twenty-five-dollar mandolin, good as new, pearl inlaid. What have you? Mrs. Maggie King, Box 92, Lownly, Ala.

Field-glasses, fishing-rod, chemistry outfit, hunting-knife, magazines, kodak. Want .22 repeater, radio. Arthur Keller, 463 So. Columbus Ave., Mt. Vernon, N. Y.

Have 9 m.m. Mauser automatic. Want .32 or .38 S. & W., Colt revolver, or automatic. J. Vandiver, 2193 McKinstry St., Detroit, Mich.

Have .22 rifle. Want flashlight. What have you? George Ralph Pattershall, Belfast, Me.

Have dark oak library suite, nearly new, 200 magazines, magic perfume, accordion, guitar and case. What have you? S. Carroll, Laurel, Del.

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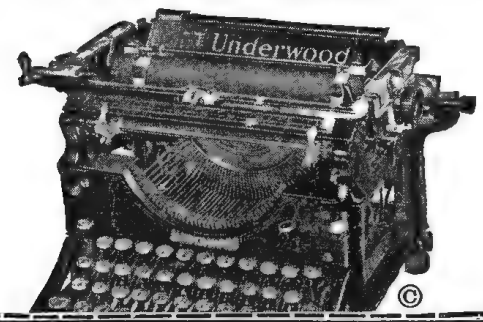

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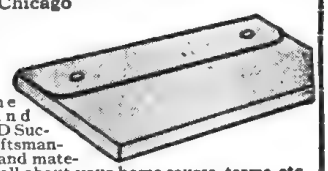

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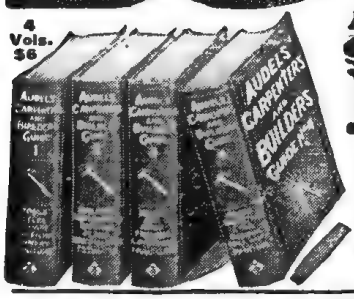

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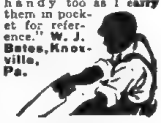

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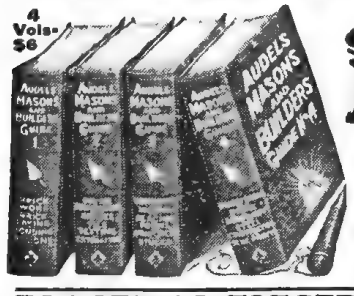

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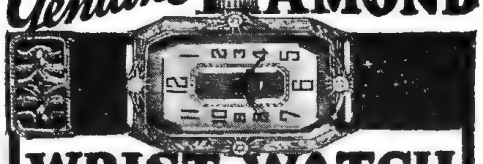

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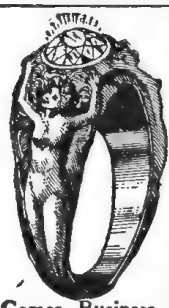

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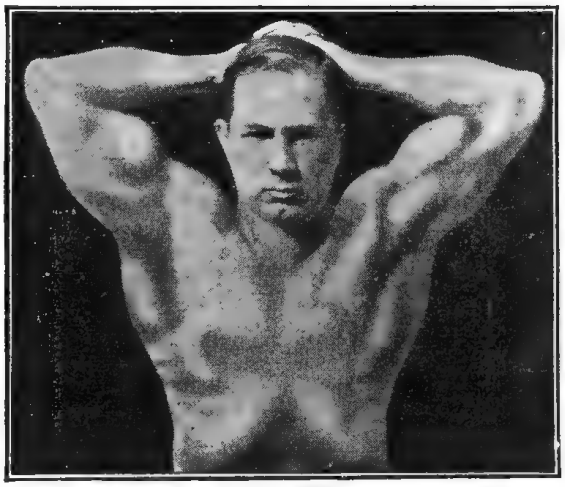

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Winner of Gold Medal at Paris Exposition, October, 1925

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If you are weak and undeveloped, you're the fellow I'm looking for. If your chest is caved in, your arms hang limp and your legs are like pipe stems, you're the fellow I'm after. Perhaps you are fat and flabby. All right, you're included too. I'm looking for fellows who are wrong physically—and who want to get in tip-top shape QUICK. It makes no difference where you fit now, the point is I'll rebuild your entire body in a remarkably short time so you will be FIT—from head to toe. Yes, I can do it because I use the same methods on you that I did on myself. A few years ago I was pronounced totally unfit for military service by eight doctors. Look at me now—and laugh that off!

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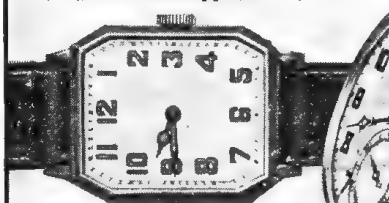

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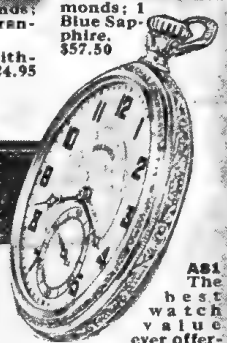

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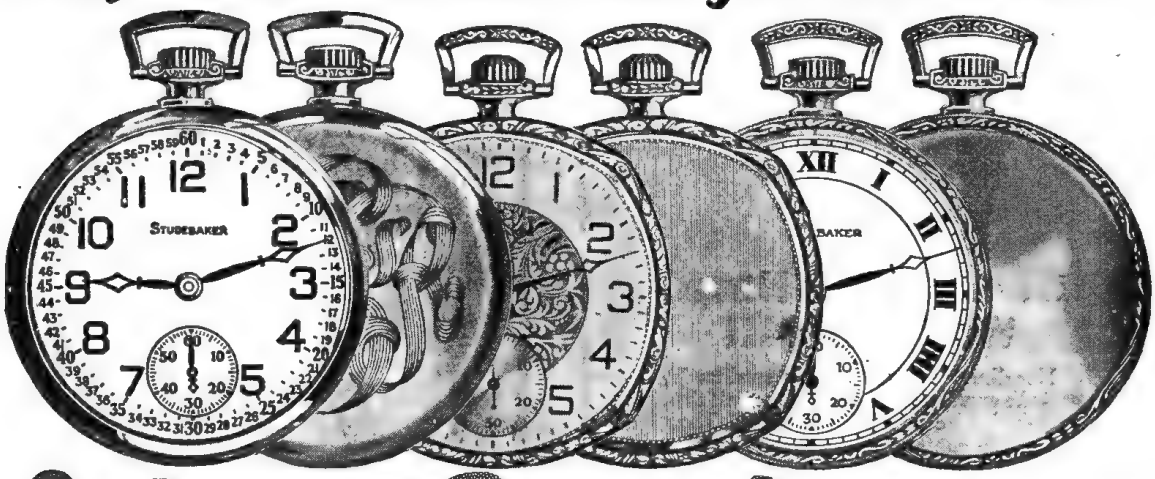

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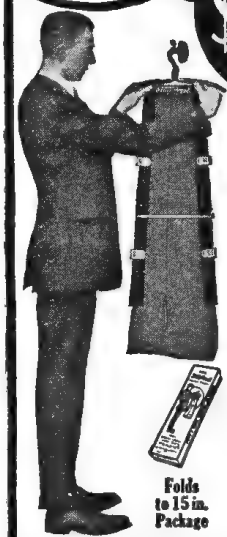

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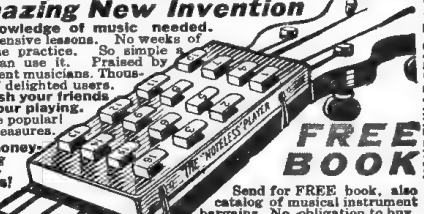

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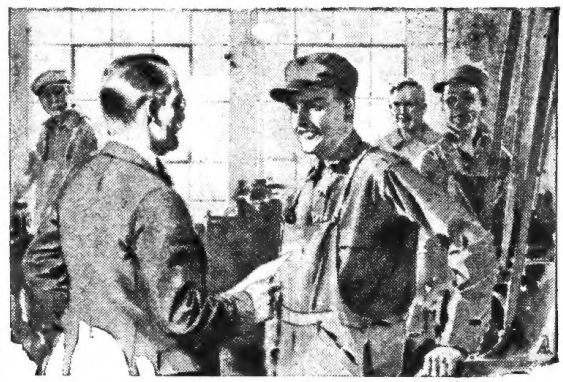

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Experience is not necessary. We want men who are ambitious—industrious and honest. Men who can earn $10 or $15 a day without getting lazy—men who can make $250 a month and still stay on the job. If you are the right type—you may be a bookkeeper, a clerk, a factory worker, a mechanic, a salesman, a farmer, a preacher, or a teacher—that makes no difference; the opportunity is here and we offer it to you.

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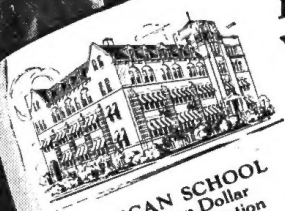

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